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October 2007

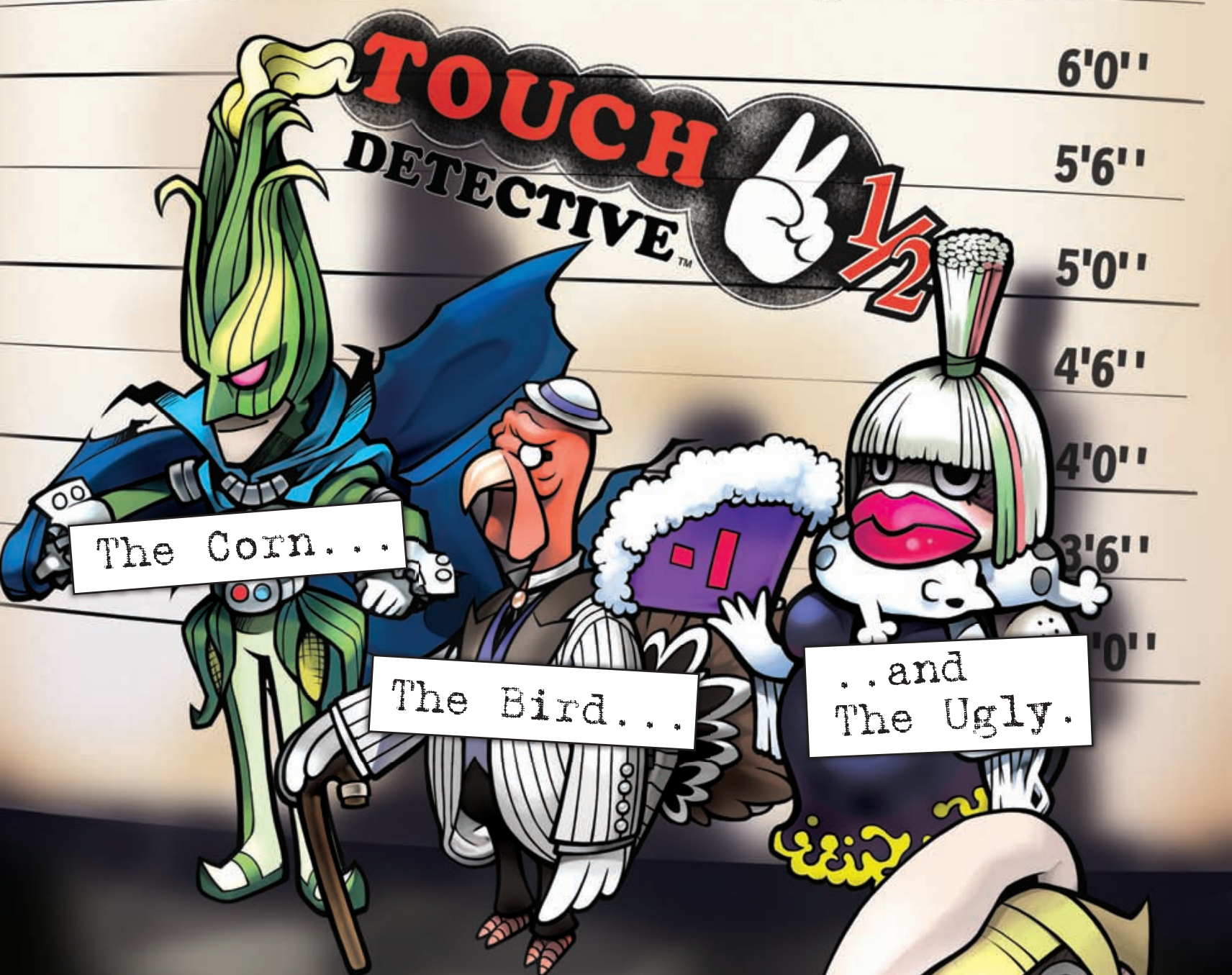
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Letter from the Editor

What's in a number? (Part 2)

...When it comes to video game scores, a whole lot. We've been talking a lot in the office lately—when we're all here together—about video game scores. Specifically about how so many video game critics, many of our own editors included, find it so difficult to pin a 10 or an "A" on a given game. Of course I'm the exception. There's no such thing as the perfect game and there never will be. A score to me depicts what I personally deem a game at that given point in time, based on my specific tastes as someone who's been living and breathing video games since the 8-bit days. Not living and breathing all of them, but the specific genres I find most appealing. You could toss the majority of games out there into a landfill and build a parking lot on them for all I care; that's why we have editors. Heavenly Sword for instance, to me, right now, as a pure action game, is a 10, and it will remain so until something comes close, which may be awhile. Is it "perfect"? No—no game ever will be; that's impossible. BioShock is racking up 10s. Perfect? Hardly. Deserved? Definitely. Same goes for Gears of War and on down the line. Look at film reviewers. They dole out 4-star, "A," or 10 reviews weekly on films that score all over the map. And nobody questions it. Roger Ebert gave Dark City a perfect score, he liked it that much. Does that make him any less a critic? On the contrary; he's just being honest about how it moved him. And that's what truly great art does. It moves us. It's not about dissecting all of the little imperfections. "Oh it had slow down on that big boss so it can't be a 10..." It's about how a game makes you feel. When Nariko looked me dead in the eye after her sacrifice, I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I've been waiting for a game to do that since the dawn of 3D. She had me at "I'm not ready to die; not yet". This industry's fear of the 10 or "A" further boggles, as it's the most prone to undue criticism, like scoring a game's value based on length over playability. A great action game should be played over and over, not once. They're built for speed not comfort. Gunstar Heroes was an hour long. That doesn't mean that by 16-bit standards it's not still a 10. The other day when Heather

turned in her Stranglehold review there was a message at the bottom that read "Heather's Personal Rating: 10, Play Readers: 8.5" (she raised it to a 9 after our discussion). Heather decided that due to the game's flaws—minor faux pas outside of the core experience—her 10 shouldn't necessarily become your 10. But I love Heather's personal passion for the game and would rather see her stick her neck out (like she did on Eternal Sonata) than hold back. I don't hold back and I get way more consenting opinions than vice versa, because people have come to know me. Before I even played Kameo people were saying, "Here comes a 10." If only I'd reviewed it; one of my few regrets. Anyway, you get the point I'm sure.

The other end of the spectrum, and our discussion this month—we really must do a podcast—was how people would perceive us if they saw the other side of Play. Our demon underbelly would scare Quattro. As an independent magazine we cover what we want. If we reviewed everything we would be considered a demonic force. If you were a fly on our wall you'd find the closest heap of dung to escape the ridicule. We just don't have time to play through every game that rolls in, and to be honest I don't have anyone for the job. Sometimes that makes me feel guilty. Like how Sega sent me Alien Syndrome after it hit retail. Through embargos and late shipments companies can slide their rubbish out without warning. Sure you can check the web, but you can find a high and low score on any game on the web. It's not the same. Maybe we should get to work on an early warning system. In the meantime don't fear the 10. Love the 10. Buy the 10.

Too bad I lost the debate J

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief



Art by: LeSean Thomas

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October 2007

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Jump in.



LETTER OF THE MONTH

I'm Board

Firstly, I'd like to applaud your magazine for taking strides to cover the underdogs of the video game industry. Few magazines would ever have the courage or the honor to put a game like Odin Sphere on their cover. It's one of the reasons why I continue subscribing.

There is, however, one thing that I would like to draw your attention to: board games. Seldom covered in the mainstream media, there has been a healthy growth of games in niche audiences that's just begging to be thrown into the mass market. As you know, Settlers of Catan, Carcassonne, and Alhambra have all been greenlighted for Live, and there are rumors circulating that Puerto Rico is going to be available. Why not highlight these electronic counterparts to their tabletop cousins?

Interesting as well would be if you could cover stuff like StarCraft: The Board Game, by Fantasy Flight Games, which looks to be shaping up to be one of the hobby's runaway hits of 2007. Its pieces are gorgeous, it's got all three StarCraft traditional races, and most StarCraft gamers don't even know of its existence! Information about it can be found here at <http://www.fantasyflightgames.com/starcraft.html>, and knowing your continued interest is with the gamer, running an article about this game and other board games based on video games or popular franchises (i.e. Word of Warcraft: The Boardgame, Doom, Lord of the Rings, War of the Ring, etc.) would be really, really interesting to see in a magazine like Play. Thank you again for your time! Christine M.

-See this month's cover story. We're gettin' there.

Playing our role

I'm a mildly physically disabled gamer, with a syndrome that (among other things) causes tremor in my hands and arms when they are under tension. Obviously this has limited my gaming choices over the years: probably 95%+ of all video games are impossible for me. But when I discovered RPGs (Dragon Warrior I was my first) I was hooked. But...now times have changed. Gamers want action, action and more action, and the studios are glad to give it to them. I've watched sadly as the number of turn-based RPGs has shrunk to a mere

trickle. Last year there were only three new games I could play. But this is just the marketplace responding to demand, so I can't complain. The problem is I actually bought seven games last year, and despite reading your reviews closely and double-checking on the net, the other four all had elements of play that were action-based. In one game I got 2/3 of the way through it before I hit a sort of FPS sequence that stopped me in my tracks. I know I (and others like me) represent a tiny fraction of your readership, but it would be awesome if you could be clearer about if an RPG is turn-based or action. I would thank you, and my wallet would, too! --Tee S.

Say hi to Art

The letter featured in the September issue was a very well written, well thought point of view. It is one I cannot entirely

"Is the car you drive Art? Are the clothes you wear Art? Is anything that can be created, in other words, automatically Art?"

disagree with either. At the same time, as a lit major with minors in religions and psychology, I have studied the so-called classics from literature to philosophy and have formulated my own theory(ies) of Art. Which means, of course, and in the nature of all good video game discussions, I have to disagree with the intent of Gisele's letter.

In praise of the letter, however, I do agree that there are aspects of artistic merit to be found within many video games – maybe not on the level proposed by Gisele (Street Fighter and R-Type I find hard to say is Art, although they are some greatly entertaining games). I likewise agree that any medium in which there is a creation for a specific audience – books, music, film, video games, even comics and manga – can achieve that elusive and inexplicable moniker of Art.

That being said, I propose a rhetorical question before giving the gist of my point: is the car you drive Art? Are the clothes you wear Art? Is anything that can be created, in other words, automatically Art?

I do not believe the act of creation translates into the making of Art. My Volkswagen is not Art, my Dickie's are not Art – they are utilities, creations to serve a purpose. Industry, not Art.

Art expresses both educational and entertaining aspects of what it means to be human. The levels of this vary according to medium, but nonetheless there should be enough fundamental "truth" within a work that strikes a chord within our beings. We feel the human struggle, we can think through life from various perspectives, etc.

Many games are quite entertaining, but in the end, they reveal nothing about what it means to be human, on a metaphysical or existential level. They propose no new philosophies of their own but recycle – as Gisele mentioned – themes and mythos from the cultures around them. And that is not Art, that is simply good storytelling! (There absolutely *is* a place in the world for some entertaining stories that are not Art!) As far as graphics go: I could not, in a million years, replicate the level of drawings and graphics that go into these games today. In that sense, what I see is beautiful, perhaps Art in and of

themselves. But we have to judge the medium as a whole – the completed game, its art, its music, its mechanics – and not just segregated parts.

But there are some games in which the exploration of the human character, or of a deeper philosophical truth, is central, and those games can very well be considered Art. I leave it up to readers to determine what games have reached into them, brought out some deeper themes, and put forth a definitive statement/philosophy regarding it – not simply leaving it an open question. Because I believe Art questions and answers, according to each artist, the themes brought up. It is for this reason that while I love the recent Zelda games, the way Link is made to be an extension of the player, the lack of a proposition or theory makes it just that: an exploration of character, a sketch, so to speak.

However, to side entirely with Gisele: Ebert is wrong. Not only because he limits an entire medium from whatever successes it can achieve (and gaming is still a young medium, it will grow), but because he assumes most "film" is Art. They are far more comparative mediums than he realizes, and very little in the way of Art has been found in film-making in

such a money-driven environment.

To leave readers with one example of my smallish rant: I recently finished reading Brave Story, translated of course. I am likewise playing the PSP Brave Story game. The novel is excellent, brings up very mature and deep themes, and has an opinion worth studying despite its fantasy trappings. It is, in short, Art. The game, however, is just a playground using the novel's world, and while it is certainly very fun...it is not bringing me the same themes, the same studies, as the book. It is a game, meant for entertainment. And there is nothing wrong with that at all. I am sure we will see games transcend into all manner of things in the future; for now, I am content just enjoying games without having to argue if they are or can be Art. Of course they can be Art, but for now, give me a controller and let me reach the fancies of my imagination! Matt E.

Conanoscipy

In your E3 2007 coverage you preview Eidos' Hybriion Adventures Conan MMO but show screens from THQ's action based Conan. I'll be picking up both but just thought I'd bring it to your attention. Thor

...As many have. Both games are rock solid!

In the year 2000...

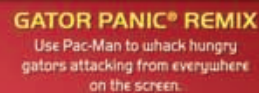
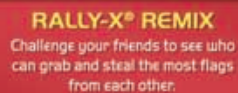
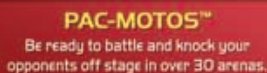
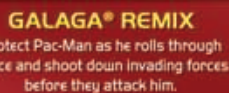
In my idea for the future of next-gen systems I would say that photorealism is the next land to be conquered. Of course our CG models and motion capture abilities are surely a towering achievement for now, but what of the imaginative foray into rendering video game characters into a human sharpness, somewhat like an actor "acting" in a video game? Or having characters interact with environments with a more resilient physical depth, somewhat like level platforms "reacting" at the same speed of reality? What if designers could create a character that is indistinguishable from a living person on a television screen? That quality itself will elicit a new factor in games that will make us reconsider how far even such an idea of cinematic gaming can go. James B

-Heavenly Sword is where it starts.



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Penny Arcade Expo 2007

The E3 for peasants outclasses the real thing

words Casey Loe

the irony of the old E3 was that it was intended as a showcase for the video game industry, yet invariably showed it in the worst possible light. Garish and sleazy, it inspired more mainstream new articles about booth babes and Paris Hilton's verbal gaffes than, you know, video games. So there's a sweet irony to the fact that PAX, the video game show for common folk—those filthy, unwashed heathens that the E3 worked so hard to keep out—is a far more dignified and gentlemanly affair. Booth babes are nowhere to be found, and no one is screaming over loudspeakers in the exhibition halls. The waits are pleasant and reasonable, and the attendees seem more interested in games than industry gossip. It's almost as if they *want* to be there.

PAX has always been a great place to have LAN parties and buy obscure gaming paraphernalia, but more and more it's moving onto the E3's turf. The exhibition hall used to offer sneak previews of games that were scant weeks away, but this year's show was packed with playable versions of far-off holiday releases like *Uncharted*, *Haze*, and *Kane & Lynch*. Game directors took to the stages to show standing-

room-only audiences the newest builds of *Assassin's Creed*, *Mass Effect* and the surprisingly impressive *Far Cry 2* (and no, I don't mean *Crysis*. *Far Cry 2*—look it up!). We jaded journalist types have seen most of those games at E3, the Games Convention in Leipzig, and private shows, but there's something refreshing about seeing exhibitions intended for the gaming public. *Assassin's Creed* Creative Director Patrice Desilets spent an hour walking a large and enthusiastic audience through the history of the game, showing old target videos and development tools that they wouldn't have bothered with at an E3—it wouldn't do to bore the reporters from *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times* with such nonsense. (They'd have devoted their few column inches to *Wii Fit* anyway). And that right there is the greatest thing about PAX: In a show for hardcore gamers, publishers weren't pandering to the casual crowd or making lofty speeches about disrupting the industry—all of the focus was on hardcore next-gen titles for the oft-forgotten group of core gamers that buy more software than everyone else combined. Heck, even Nintendo was showing enthusiast titles like *Fire Emblem* that they'd normally sweep under the rug.

PAX is still small, but it's growing fast. It has doubled in size every year since it was established in 2004, and has now moved from Bellevue's cozy Meydenbauer Center to the giant Washington State Convention Center in Seattle. That lead to a lot of talk about PAX taking over for E3, but the PAX creators seem to have other plans, filling their extra space with developer roundtables, hands-on demos and nerdcore concerts instead of sleazy booth babes, photo-ops with professional wrestlers, and press conferences that tout interactive board games over 20 million-dollar gaming epics. Let's hope it stays that way.

"PAX is still small, but it's growing fast."

At a show that mixes video games, card games, and tabletop games, focusing on *Eye of Judgment* was a no-brainer. Hasbro (owner of *Wizards of the Coast*, who developed the cards) bought the game its own booth, which was almost as large as Sony's.





A stage for improvised Rock Band bands drew massive crowds. There were three songs on the demo, but everyone—everyone—chose Radiohead's Creep.



The air at PAX is so thick with Nintendo DS wireless signals that you can barely walk through it. Even in a show devoted to gaming's hardcore elite, nary a PSP could be found.

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NPD Group database

October 2007

Hottest Heroines

Here's how some recent Girls of Gaming stack up in the NPD ratings:

GAME	SYSTEM	SALES
Final Fantasy X-2	PS2	1.6 million
Tomb Raider Legend	Xbox360	252,000
Tomb Raider Legend	PS2	269,000
Tomb Raider Legend	Xbox	117,000
Tomb Raider Legend	PSP	75,000
Tomb Raider Legend	GCN	30,000
Tomb Raider Legend	NDS	29,000
Tomb Raider Legend	GBA	13,000
Tomb Raider Legend Total US	--	785,000
Tomb Raider: Anniversary	PS2	343,000
Perfect Dark Zero	Xbox360	263,000
Perfect Dark Zero Limited Edition	Xbox360	284,000
Kameo: Elements of Power	Xbox360	284,000
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria	PS2	112,000
Odin Sphere	PS2	79,000
Dead or Alive Xtreme 2	Xbox360	64,000
Bullet Witch	Xbox360	36,000

Of note...

Kameo has sold an additional 16,000 copies since we last checked in on her in April. Not bad for a launch title. A sequel seems in order.

Odin Sphere is closing on the 100k mark. Remarkable for a 2D PS2 game two years into the next-gen cycle.

Apparently Rare needs to begin work on a Joanna Dark sequel as well. 600,000-plus in sales speaks volumes.

Bullet Witch's harsh critics seem to have won the battle. The promising new IP will likely not spawn a sequel as originally planned unless the game finds an audience over the holidays at a discount price (if Atari so chooses).

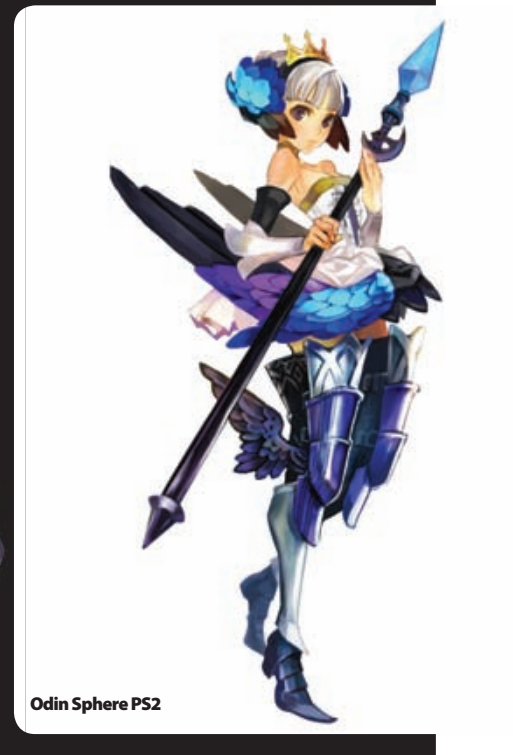


Final Fantasy X-2 PS2



Tomb Raider: Anniversary PS2

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Odin Sphere PS2

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Tools of Destruction, flights of whimsy...

RATCHET AND CLANK FUTURE



wordsXXXXXX

W

atch out for Insomniac's next game, the one after Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction. "[With] the next game, I'm going with vampirates!" Anthony "Moo" Yu, gameplay lead says.

This is not to slight Tools of Destruction, which seems awash in graphical finery and a genuine sense of delightful possibilities, in any way, shape, or form. Nor is it a jab at the alien Ratchet or his robotic pal, Clank. In fact, Tools should prove to be a great adventure, as well as an excellent next-generation debut for the well-loved platforming adventure series. It's just that, well, the promise of a vampire/pirate fusion is simply too cool to ignore, even if it was made facetiously.

Work with us, here.

Jell-o for Ratchet to climb and jump on, in essence creating his own platforms. Flight is made possible with Robo-Wings, with players tilting the PlayStation 3 controller to bank and turn the characters. A powerful Geo-Laser can be used to slice through huge stone or ice walls; the motion-sensitive controls are used to "cut," and players must direct a beam to appropriately marked weak spots on the structure.

DESTRUCTIVE AIMS

Insomniac certainly isn't talking about the game's plot on this day. Today, in fact, there are only hints of the larger puzzle.

Developers love to champion a game's story, even when improvements to the plot add up to correct punctuation and spelling within the on-screen text. Insomniac, however, seems to be intent on giving Tools an intriguing storyline.

For starters, the game will have text trees. Players can now select their responses and shape in-game conversations. This is, of course, the first time the Ratchet series has implemented this feature. Although it remains to be seen how this new feature will play out in the course of the adventure, it does seem to suggest Insomniac might not be just paying lip service to the art of storytelling in games.

The game opens with Ratchet and Clank having to escape from the city of Metropolis. As it turns out, however, Metropolis wasn't the real target: Ratchet was. It seems the Lombaxes (of which the wrench-wielding Ratchet is one) have a great secret. This secret forms the nucleus of the plot, and it's the developers' stated intent to use this as a leaping-off point from which to explore Ratchet's past. And there's more...

More specifically: The developers hinted at a rift between the game's protagonists. From the start, Ratchet and his robotic pal Clank have been simpatico, two characters of a like mind on just about every subject. Now, however, Nicholls suggests there will be a division, a test of the duo's friendship. It seems that Clank has been seeing creatures that Ratchet, for some odd reason, is unable to. These robotic creatures are called Zoni and, among other things, they'll help Clank gain access to new abilities. This, then, may form the basis of the split.

Other plot elements may, or may not, be secondary to the story. At one point,

GROOVE TO FUNK

You has just walked us through the weapons in Tools of Destruction. There will be more than 23 separate weapons and one-shot combat devices, and the emphasis here is on what the PlayStation 3 can do for the arms industry in the Ratchet and Clank Universe.

This time around, the common Slinky becomes a weapon. Here, they're called death springs, a wildly careening set of metal coils that expand and contract to destroy multiple enemies. Deadly green goo can be fired and forgotten across a potential battlefield. When an enemy approaches, the goo leaps to life, forming deadly plasma beasts. These hulking brutes then proceed to smash any hostiles in their general vicinity. Players can also access a tornado launcher, with the ability to control a maelstrom by tilting the Sixaxis controller while moving Ratchet with an analog stick.

There are a standard set of rocket launchers, beam guns, and razor disc shooters, but these pale in comparison to the game's great dynamic duo of weaponry: Mr. Zurkon and the groovinator. Zurkon is a crazed destructor robot who flies around smiting enemies and yelling out "Mr. Zurkon lives to destroy!" before it eventually self-destructs in a spray of pyrotechnics, and the groovinator, simply, hearkens back to the funk attacks of goofy aliens ToeJam and Earl. When the groovinator is shot at a foe (or group of them), a disco ball appears and Tools of Destruction does its own version of Saturday Night Fever. The stricken enemies are helpless to resist the music; they begin dancing, setting themselves up for the inevitable trip to oblivion.

"The role of a Ratchet enemy is to live short and die spectacularly," Chris Nicholls, the game's director of animation says.

Along with the weapons, Ratchet and Clank will have access to some exotic tools such as the gelanator, a device that shoots out cubes of semi-solid green

TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION

words Greg Orlando

"Zurkon is a crazed destructor robot who flies around smiting enemies and yelling out 'Mr. Zurkon lives to destroy!'"



If you're into platformers, this is the game you've waited your whole life for.

“Insomniac emphasizes the game will be built around mystery, spectacle, adventure, and variety.”

the playable Clank must infiltrate a space pirate base and, of course, holographic technology allows him to accomplish this feat. As a “holopirate” Clank gains a burnished metal hook on his hand, a tripart hat on his head, and will limp around on a wooden peg leg. As befitting a jaunt into a pirate lair, Clank will have to prove his stuff by dancing a merry buccaneer’s jig in a special minigame. He may also, at the insistence of a pirate lord, need to be “buffin’ someone’s cannonballs to a high shine.”

How this fits into Tools of Destruction’s bigger picture is anyone’s guess.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Insomniac emphasizes the game will be built around mystery, spectacle, adventure, and variety. So far, all the elements seem to be in place.

Ratchet and Clank’s future on PlayStation 3 is full of brightly polished metals, reflective surfaces, rails that glint in the sun. There are ice-covered planets decorated with gently falling snow, and dank, compact caves that are dappled with green gray. Huge cities rise up in the

distance, hinting at a larger world beyond the player’s scope. In outer space, players get to navigate through and around huge black holes and nebulae that bloom in a swirl of red, blue, and yellow. It’s a sharp contrast to Insomniac’s other PlayStation 3 title, a dystopian little shooter called Resistance: Fall of Man.

In-game enemies show a wealth of diversity. Some, like a brontosaurus-esque creature are considerably huge. When Ratchet scales these beasts, he’ll discover a mini-environment on its back and on the top of its head. Space pirates, it seems, like to hide treasure on these huge beasts’ backs. Other, tinier, creatures are no less impressive. At one point, Ratchet and Clank get to confront a series of armored foes with a glass enclosure where the faceplate should be. These are, literally, fish in armor, and when their protective garments are shattered, they’ll fall to the ground and flop around helplessly.

On this day, there are two platforming levels available for play. The first, Sargasso, is pastoral, filled with huge lumbering dinosaurs. Sargasso is open-ended, with lots of options to roam and explore; the goal is to take down a series of fire-spitting Tyrannosaurus rex-lookalike

Grunthors and acquire some artifacts that can then be traded in for a special item. The second stage is Isis, and it is a more traditional platformer-based level. Here, Clank will need to use his holopirate disguise to defeat wily yet comical space pirates who, during a private moment, lament their profession’s decided lack of medical and dental insurance.

For the topper, a space-based shooter level is there to kick everyone’s ass. Players maneuver a spaceship with one analog stick on the PlayStation 3 controller, and control the weapons reticule with another. It’s a recipe for frustration, cooked up with a difficulty meant to stymie even the most adept player. Look for this to undergo some serious tuning before the game’s released.

Destruction reigns in October.

Ratchet & Clank Future: ToD

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Insomniac
Publisher	Sony
Available	October 23

preview

Ratchet finds a brief moment of solitude.



INTERVIEW

Brian Allgeier, creative director, *Insomniac*

by Brady Fiechter

play: I'm gonna start by asking you a really dull question, but I'm curious as someone who prefers more on-rails games: Just how much more open is this game from the typical Ratchet universe?

Brian Allgeier: We have about 20 to 30 percent of the game with more open areas that we let you really explore. We have a city level you can actually fly through. We also have these open sections, these space ports that you can run around in. But really we wanted the story and the mystery and that to kind of guide players through. We really didn't want to create this big open place where you didn't know where to go. I think one thing our fans really appreciate from the past games was the focus, the weapons progressions, each setup has an interesting progression to it.

Good to hear.



We definitely want exploration, we've got a lot of secrets this time, we've got a lot more open spots and various distractions that will take people off the beaten path. But really we still want to keep with the spirit of the past games.

Where's one area you look to challenge yourselves this far along in the series?

Really, just making everything feel much more integrated. Have that living breathing world quality to it. Giving people the satisfaction of much more lore of the world. We've got the situations where you talk to the Smuggler, converse with various characters. And then the fact that so many of the characters are talking, Ratchet and Clank talk to each other a lot. Characters like the Pirates have conversations while you're exploring. There are more choices for going through the worlds. The devices offer a higher level of strategy than what we've had before. And really, just the beauty of making this CG-animated-like world, where everything comes to life. We're hitting the mark we always wanted to hit with the past games but simply couldn't. These cities being destroyed, the intense grind-rail chases. In the end, we were always happy with what we had, but were really only about 70 percent of the way there. We were missing the full cinematic experience. Like you see in *Metropolis*.

That level's definitely awesome.

Cool, yeah, we definitely like it [laughs].

And that was something you came up with from the beginning right?

Yeah, we had a really early meeting: We definitely wanted to do Ratchet & Clank on the PS3, it's gonna be awesome. And we immediately started talking about *Metropolis*, we have to bring that city back. Imagine what we can do with it. Why don't we just start it all off with a bang. Kind of go the route other games have gone where their first level's really intense. So we decided let's just blow the shit out of *Metropolis* [laughs].

And you say along with that spectacle you really want to go deep into the story this time?

Yeah, yeah, we're really looking at

"We're hitting the mark we always wanted to hit with the past games but simply couldn't"

Brian Allgeier, creative director

Ratchet's roots, all the history behind him. We've never done anything like this before.

You've said this a couple times, going back to the roots of the series. What led to this decision?

The whole series, we started with, Ok, it's platforming with some shooter elements. Cool, great, that's new, that's different. Then it became a platformer with shooter elements and RPG stuff in *Going Commando*, then it became, more shooter, multiplayer, then with *Deadlocked* it was total shooter, co-op, multiplayer, and it was so adrenaline fueled, and maybe a little too driven that we wanted to pull back and return to what made the first and second games so great. But still sprinkling in a lot of the stuff that's spread throughout the whole series. So it's that variety, that exploration... that fun!

You have a favorite in the series? I still like 2.

I have different favorites for different reasons. Some of it just depends on working on certain ones, some of the pains [laughs]. But I really like *Up Your Arsenal* a lot. A lot of people love the second one.

Yeah, that's still my favorite. I guess in the third one everything came together, but the second one felt like it took the surprise of the first and built on that. Yeah. It definitely had more sense of adventure. There were more options to explore.

Just how important is the visual fidelity of what you're making now? I don't know... we really are at a place where it feels that next-gen has finally happened. Absolutely. One of the things we focused on even with the *Spyro* series is having a visceral quality to the game and really building up the fantasy. There are many different reasons why people play games,

and one is fantasy fulfillment. And there's the reason where they want it to be tactile, they want it to be strategic, they want that gameplay. They want the action and reaction type of stuff. It goes back to the early ages of film with story versus spectacle. There's a balance that needs to be maintained. It's amazing how when you do add the music, the sound effects, the visuals, it pulls you into the world. You can't discount that. I know there are design purists out there who believe graphics are crap, we don't need them, let's just have pure gameplay. On some levels, I think that's just half the equation. You have got to pay attention to the fantasy.

It's interesting to me, I've had a few conversations with some designers who have played the *Darkness*, and recently *BioShock*, and they comment how they are reminded just how important presentation is. I look at *BioShock*, at the opening when the ship is going through the tubes to the entrance of the biosphere, and I'm thinking about how often you can tell someone is trying to create a sense of wonder, but they just don't pull it off because the visual isn't there. And here it really hits you. On paper, they see it...

You know, you are wrangling so many pieces, there's a lot of management making sure every little part comes together the right way. It's so tough. My position, I became creative director on this project, and that was a fairly newly invented position. We recognized, we need some guy who is paying attention to the story, the music, the gameplay and making sure all these pieces come together in a unified whole. It's so easy to say, Ok, we need our multiplayer bulletpoint, our co-op bulletpoint and on and on. But what does that mean in the total package? And that's part of why we decided we wanted to stick with single-player, make it completely cohesive.

I personally just don't play multiplayer much.

Yeah, I get owned all the time! [laughs]

But no, seriously, you can't get past the fact that there are those guys who are so good, all they do is get good at that one game hours a day, and they take the fun out of it for me. And

there are so many games I want to play, there's not enough draw to sit down and spend hours with one online.

The best multiplayer experience I have ever had besides of course Ratchet &



Captain Quark, before and after.

Dance Dance Evolution.



Clank: Up Your Arsenal is Battlefield 1942, and we had it in the office, nobody had played it before. So we are all new to it, we were all at the same level, that was great. But a lot of the other multiplayer games there are just so many experts out there. It's rough.

What keeps you inspired to continue making games?

Definitely the challenge of making them. It's weird... by now you'd think I'd be sick of Ratchet and Clank, but I'm such a huge fan. And I love pirates, we get to play around with pirates now. We get to do a lot of different things a lot of different game genres can't do. We can go into so many types of directions, explore so many different kinds of gameplay. There's a lot of freedom, and I like that.

I still love the abstraction of certain games. Not everyone gets to have the groovitron.

[laughs] Yeah, we can do stuff like the groovitron, and that's an example of a stun weapon. But then we put in all these layers of dance animations, and it adds a visceral, humorous quality to it. We never could have put the groovitron in Resistance [laughs].

The groovitron has been kind of the foundation of the early presentations for the game, how did it come about?

Actually, in Ratchet 1, we had about 60 different ideas. We pitched the idea of having a rave ball, at the time, one of the designers, he was into raves. So that was kind of the inspiration behind it. But we couldn't do it, because it required the enemies to have too many separate animations, we just didn't have the memory. A lot of time, with the PlayStation 2, and the PlayStation 1, we were just cutting out a lot of animations to get things into memory. But now we have tons of memory, we can do that kind of thing, and our animators have become a lot more efficient in creating great animations.

What are some of the things you've really had to sacrifice this time around?



"Yeah, we keep throwing stuff in and waiting for it to break, but it doesn't. Which is kind of surprising."

Well, we do cut stuff, but it's starting to come down to the time we have. Sometimes ideas are great and are working out fairly well but we had some abilities for Ratchet we wanted to do, and we realized we needed to save it for some other game. Those are tough choices we have to make. I think we just have too many ideas, which is part of the problem.

Have you learned enough from Resistance that you have to cut a lot fewer corners with the technology?

Yeah, we keep throwing stuff in and waiting for it to break, but it doesn't. Which is kind of surprising. Obviously, we're always optimizing stuff and using a lot of our proprietary technology and engine to make sure we can get the best out of the PlayStation 3.

You know, it's amusing how often we go from generation of hardware to generation of hardware, basking in how exciting the leap in technology is. But I don't know, we're in a pretty interesting place along that evolutionary curve. [Brian Hastings] had some strong things to say about the power of the PS3.

Yeah, a lot of what he was talking about was the long-term vision. He should probably talk to you directly about this, but with the Wii, you look at how short term it might be...

I've had a lot of fun with the Wii so far, but I do ask, and I can't really say either way, but am I enjoying these games because they're so exclusively

Nintendo? Nintendo gives me a game that no one else does. That's why I love Nintendo, that spirit of imagination that is so distinct to the company. Is it because I'm wagging the controller, or because I'm simply playing a Nintendo game and hitting a nerve?

Yeah, that history of Nintendo, the nostalgia involved. The type of experience

they've created. And that's something we're really conscious of with this game, creating that sense of wonder and really looking at the various aspects of what make the spirit of the series special. We want to wrap people up in beautiful world. There are a lot of different considerations, so much stuff, and you're doing all this with 125 different people.

few things and focus on them. And it does take a lot of iteration. What's really helped us out on this one is that we've had a lot of preproduction time. We've been able to iterate and prototype large portions of the game and make sure it works before committing to it.

Having been with this series for so long, does there come a confidence you can draw on? More a place where you can say, this is what I believe in rather than leaving it up to focus testing?

Definitely. It's funny, because sometimes you come up with an idea and you're excited about it, and you have all these doubts that start to creep in. You look at it from different angles and try to pick it apart. I think it's a natural tendency for designers to constantly pick their own ideas apart. There's this little tester in your head. You begin to learn that you have to listen to that voice and look back at past games. I think about the gelatonium, that was something at first I just wasn't sure about. But later I decided, you know what, I really love it, I want to jump on Jell-O, let's do it. It sounds cheesy, but it really is about believing in your own ideas.

I think Nintendo is very good at taking a few simple concepts and making them as good as they possibly can be. I think a mistake being made a lot is when designers talk about all the stuff they're throwing into their games, talking up all the new features and complexities on offer, forgetting about making far fewer ideas the best they can possibly be.

A lot of that comes from experience. Typically people don't know what's going to work and what's not going to work, so they want to throw everything in and do the kitchen sink game. They know there might be a few hits in there and a few misses. You have to have the confidence and experience and the courage to say we're going to pick a



"It's funny, because sometimes you come up with an idea and you're excited about it, and you have all these doubts that start to creep in."

How do you approach balancing difficulty? That's another area I find even myself changing on what I want out of a game. I just don't want to be challenged too much anymore. There's a fine line between engagement and frustration.

It's really helpful having natural difficulty tuning with the RPG elements. If you are failing a few times, you get more experience, Ratchet eventually gets more health points and bolts, then you can buy some of the bigger items more easily. That's one way that helps, then of course we do focus test. You can't listen to the hardcore fanboys who yell that the game is too easy. Proper ramping to get everyone up to the right skill level is really important. In the end, you want the player to feel empowered.

Whenever you are making a game, do you keep in the back of your mind favorites from the past? Games that you'll always draw from because they appeal to your sensibilities as a designer? I know some designers who will always go back to, say, a Metroid or Zelda, because they represent a richness they want to hold on to.

That's a good question.... I definitely was a big fan of early games, Adventure on the 2600. I love just playing around with stuff. I love how you can pick up a bridge, cross

over a gap, take a sword with a magnet. I'd do a lot of weird funky stuff in the game. That was fun opening up a world you could play in. I was also a big fan of text adventures. Just anything that offered a sense of world, exploration, puzzle solving, something I really like. And then Mario 64 was a huge influence. And Tomb Raider. I think I learned a lot from Nintendo in general about how they train, how they ramp, how they add elements together. Also loved Donkey Kong Country. That was some awesome platforming, building up the skillset the player uses. Really introducing something, letting you learn it and add on interesting ways. That's part of the thing that's also challenging, is how do we make things economical? We don't want kitchen sink games where you try something once and you don't use it again. How do you build on the skills the player is learning?

Just the simple idea of collecting is still so much fun, and a foundation of a game even if you don't realize it. It's part of the idea of exploration and discovery.

Yeah, it really is about exploration and feeling, Hmm, I want to jump up the dinosaur's back, what's up there? Oh cool, a treasure chest. You want to reward people for coming up with their own motivations. It's easy for a designer to want to direct players on where to go,

and in the end you feel like you're jumping through hoops. If you can let the player where they want to go and then reward them for searching, I think that's a much more powerful experience.

With a game like Ratchet, is that harder to do sometimes?

Yeah, we are always balancing. Story and gameplay can go against each other. We want these big story hooks pull you through the level and make you curious about what is the answer to the Lombax secret, what is Quark up to now? We want the humor and the hooks. But we also want you to have that freedom. We go back and forth between that.

With the new level of presentation, do you think there is more of a connection with the characters, more of a feeling you are indeed working in this world rather than being drug along?

That's one thing we talk a lot about in this game is having expressive characters. We

have a ton of memory where we can throw in so much animation. We have not had any issues with running out of memory because of animations. Usually it's from light maps and our texture maps. But yeah, having expressive characters, believable characters is so important.

You're taking Clank in an interesting direction. There are some supernatural elements?

Yeah, he meets these mysterious creatures called the Zoni, and he sees them after their ship crashes in the Polaris galaxy. You're not quite sure if Clank is losing his mind. Ratchet has always been thought of as the man of science, he's the guy who wants more immediate results, seeing is believing. Clank is more altruistic, he sees the bigger picture. Here he's seeing something Ratchet can't see. So there's a divide there.

Does that translate into a shift in tone for the series?

When your buddy with a Wii asks why you paid more for your PS3, show him this.





Yeah, well, I think we're trying to delve more into more personal feelings that the characters have and connecting closer to who they are. We still have a lot of the humor, but we also want to have something that grounds the story a bit more.

When you went back to the drawing board after *Resistance*, what was the one thing you knew needed to be there? It really is that sense of wonder. That's the key word that was really our launch point. It ties into the exploration and adventure and discovery and curiosity.

And what needed changed?

More exploration and more cinematic, visceral moments. Buildings crashing, bridges blowing up, flying with the

Pterodactyl. And really patterning after a CG animated move. That's one thing that came up a lot. Let's make this into a CG-animated-like experience.

How important do you think the HD part of that equation is? I still can't get over how big of a deal HD is to tricking my brain into believing what I see is real. I was really skeptical of the HD thing at first. At first, I told myself I didn't notice a difference. But it is huge. It just really is a huge difference when you go to HD. I finally feel like I'm fulfilling that fantasy of being in an animated movie or something. It's weird.

What do you point at in your game that really sells that fantasy? It really is the blending of a lot of stuff.

"I think we're pushing a lot and making use of a lot of great tools, but I think there is just a lot more that's left to see."

All the activity, the lighting, there's so much going on now. Every world has some different effect that is extraordinary. Whatever it is... it's like watching a movie and saying, people don't act that way, trees don't look that way, something is wrong there. You don't want that. It's about making all that feel more real, and that's the challenge we have. Everything must feel natural.

Is that even more difficult in a sense, because you can in some ways see the holes even more within all that detail? Oh yeah, sure.

There's more relation to what you're seeing, so you see the hitches. More power you have, the more people, the more complicated it continues to get. That's something we always have to pay attention to.

Ted Price said this when he was demoing *Resistance*, that all these people you have, everyone is a gamer in this company.

Yeah, we have people who love games. Everyone is throwing out suggestions about what can make the game even better. Ever since being with Insomniac,

when we were around 20 people, everyone was a game designer. We continually recognized what the core of a game was all about. You can make pretty pictures all you want, but in the end, what makes us different is that you interact.

What's one area you are still learning about how to make that even more effective?

It is still making everything feel integrated. And working with so many different elements coming from so many different people. Learning to speak everyone's language. Learning to talk about music, and how to be specific about different parts of music and the emotional qualities. Or I'll look at an image and think about the color theory, and how the color contrasts and how to make it read well to the player and also look good. I have to go a bit deeper now into everything. There's so much learning with this new technology. I think we're pushing a lot and making use of a lot of great tools, but I think there is just a lot more that's left to see.



Language
Violence

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syphon filter LOGAN'S SHADOW

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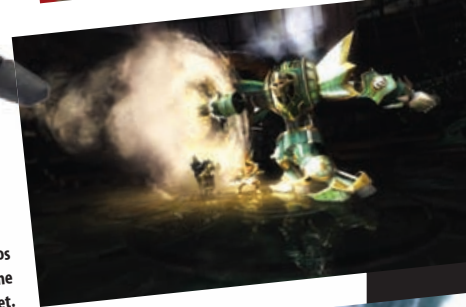


words Dave Halverson

the
eye
of

judgment

Your future is in the cards



Apparently Talos hasn't seen the intro. yet.



Casual games have become a permanent fixture on the gaming landscape, ballooning into one of the most successful genres over the past few years. Yet they remain for the most part hit-or-miss distractions aimed squarely at the non-gamer. So powerful is this new market that Nintendo bet the farm on a console and business plan designed specifically to corner it. Isn't it ironic then that the most expensive, technologically advanced new console on the market would be the one to birth the

first "next-gen" console game outside of the music category that bridges the gap between casual and enthusiast gamers? Eye of Judgment isn't only a virtual playground for the throngs of people that play tactile card games; it's the birth of a cottage industry designed for the inner geek in all of us—gamers and non-gamers alike. You can now add virtual card reader to the laundry list of PS3 functions. Many a weekend I've peered into the local strip mall hobby store and wondered what all those people at card tables could possibly be thinking. I get the whole "my dragon just torched your goblin dude" thing; I just can't imagine deriving jubilation

"...watching a massive behemoth seemingly generate out of my coffee table to scorch a pair of nasty goblins however, now that's something."

from a deck of cards. Actually watching a massive behemoth seemingly generate out of my coffee table to scorch a pair of nasty goblins however, now that's something. Using a cloth mat, a deck of cards, and a camera that reads them and seamlessly beams their monstrosities to life—this is as close to real-time wizardry as any of us are going to get until we get holograms, which is at best nine years away (PS4). Like any laudable card battle though, EoJ's

“Look down and there’s a cloth mat and a few cards; look up and it’s being assimilated in real-time on your HD display...”

worth will ultimately be determined by the nuance of its decks, characters, and rules of engagement. Then there’s the matter condensing it all into a 9-square cloth mat. This is where Sony Japan has succeeded beyond all expectations. Once the deck is shuffled and divided into 30 card decks, five cards per player are drawn along with a Mana charge to begin casting. You gain two additional Mana per turn and one draw from the deck. Mana can also be obtained by sacrifice, ending your turn and winning battles.

The object of the game isn’t limited to simply out-drawing your opponent and winning via brute force. Duels are won by occupying five spaces on the map; how you do so depends on your hand and the plethora of choices presented by the cards as the game wears on. The playfield is occupied by five elements: fire, ice, desert, forest and Biolith (machine) in various configurations determined by the parameters you set. Placing characters on their matching element gives them optimum power and can also affect adjacent characters. Certain creatures can live on opposing fields and some will die. Conversely, below each element resides a second element which can be flipped with certain spell cards. You might have skipped turns and/or sacrificed characters to cast a powerful 7 or 9 Mana beast,

only to have it wiped off the map by a 2 Mana Fissure card...if your opponent is holding one. Each deck is loaded with nuance. Beguiling Fog allows you to face an opposing character away from you and towards an ally; Tentacles of Possession, a mere 2 Mana cast, can give you possession of any character on the board as long as it’s adjacent to a water field. Then again, any opposing element kills it so it’s a vulnerable cast. There are ranged characters, support characters, dual facing characters and numerous spells assuring that no two games are

quite alike. And that’s with a starter deck. More decks are on the way. Yet another layer of strategy comes from each deck’s four utility cards. Action cards target and carry out attacks, End Turn cards can be used to gain Mana should you decide to pass, the Status card reveals pertinent information when placed on any card, and there’s a Cancel card should you change your mind mid cast. You also choose where you do battle from six different domains, the duration of each turn, how the field is generated and whether or not the battles play out in 3D. Turn this ON. Once a card is placed adjacent to its opponent, the materialization is instant



as is the attack or spell, as the map peels away seamlessly (the game never loads) to reveal the gorgeous battle within. Each arena is stunning to behold and the character models are simply spectacular, painstakingly normal mapped and adorned with incredible detail. Look down and there’s a cloth mat and a few cards; look up and it’s being assimilated in real-time on your HD display accompanied by a gothic metal opus that moves in conjunction with the flow of the game. The future is now.

Sony’s Eye technology is one of the great inventions since the birth of the console holding more promise than any single peripheral in the history of gaming. There’s no end to the licensing and growth potential it holds. Imagine your favorite movie or game universe brought to life under Sony’s Eye... a God of War, Heavenly Sword, Star Wars or Aliens deck: The possibilities are endless.

Somewhere a Smart Car is on the wrong side of the road and there’s a black Mac truck with flames on the sides closing fast...with a broken horn.

The Eye of Judgment

System(s)	PS3
Developer	SCE Studios Japan
Publisher	SCEA
Available	October 23

preview



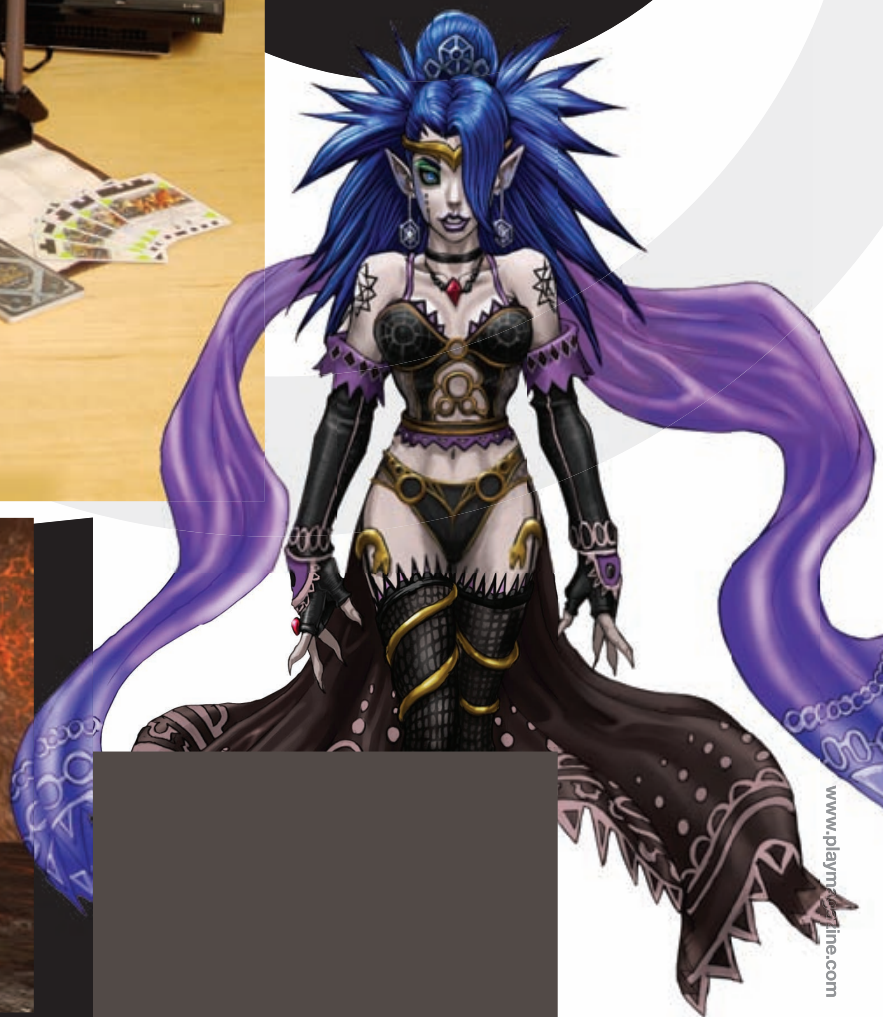
Right: It’s easy to get carried away profiling cards.





the setup

What you see is what you get. \$69.99 (the game costs considerably more in Japan by the way) covers the game, the custom battle mat, a starter deck of cards, the Eye (camera) and a velvety RPG pouch to stow it all in. Considering the retail price of most PS3 games alone this is a deal that Ron Popeil himself would be proud of. The game sets up in seconds, and once you've played your first duel you'll forget all about that other use for your TV. Online duels are great fun, as are versus CPU battles, but nothing beats a live 2-player duel to the death.



interview

Felice Standifer, Producer, Mark Valledor, Product Manager, and Yusuke Watanabe, Senior Game Designer, JAPAN Studio, Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios

Did Sony create the technology for the game or did you create the game for the technology?

Felice: This is a tough question to answer. It is a bit of both because they both challenged each other. As we created the game we had to modify the technology, and as we worked on the technology we had to evolve the game.

Having played the game extensively I'm in awe of how nuanced and compelling a card duel you created your first time out. From where did you draw your inspiration?

Felice: We love strategy games. Board games, trading card games, video games, all of these have been great influences. Yusuke: Thank you so much. We are very proud of the title. The game concept combines three elements that make The Eye of Judgment a unique and never-seen-before game: the strategy of a board game, the playability of chess, and a mind game you can only experience through cards. This combined with the new technology and PlayStation 3 was the basis of the game.

I believe that the fact that I was not originally a TCG player actually helped me to achieve this new concept by giving me a fresh view to the whole idea.

The availability of new decks to keep the game fresh seems vital. How will this

work?

Mark: Many new cards will be coming soon. Our partnership with Wizards of the Coast has been very helpful in design, balancing and manufacturing. In addition to the cards that come with the game, players can add more cards. Booster Packs and pre-constructed theme decks will be sold by our partner, Wizards of the Coast.

Are you also able to change elements over time or will the game always use the set five; fire, wood, biolith, earth, and water?

Felice: Once you read the storyline, you'll understand how the five elements came to be. While we don't plan to change these elements at first, as we work on more sets, we will constantly evaluate the game and see how we can introduce new elements.

This technology is remarkable. How does the camera recognize the card and seamlessly transmit the data to the PS3? Is there something actually in or on the card?

Felice: The secret lies within the CyberCode embedded in the EOJ Summoning Cards. In addition to the tracking markers, the CyberCode is scanned by the PlayStation Eye and processed by the PlayStation 3.

Will decks stand the test of time and 100s or 1000s of shuffles?

Mark: The cards themselves will be of the

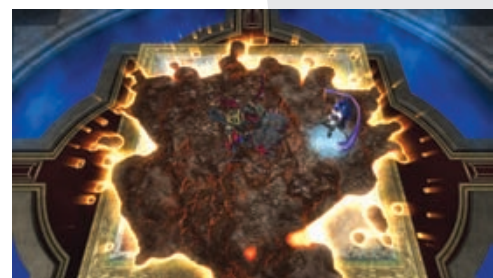
best quality, which is why we chose to work with Wizards of the Coast. Not only are they the experts in trading card strategy games, but they are a leader in card manufacturing. So yes, you can shuffle forever.

About these character designs, our deck featured 30 characters. How many are there total?

Mark: This first set will include 90 different creatures and 20 different spells. Every few months we plan to follow up with another hundred or so cards. We're already finished with set 2, and I'm sure you'll be happy with those.

The models and animation are outstanding. What are the team's personal favorites? I'm partial to Triceptaur Behemoth and Dancing Temptress (one of precious few females).

Mark: My favorite card is the Green Lycanthrope – playing him is risky because he can either be a harmless creature or a very powerful monster, depending on how lucky you are. It's not the most graphically amazing card, but the strategic implications can be changed the course of the battle. Yusuke: Since there are so many creatures, it's difficult to choose the best, and each person has different favorites. My favorite is the Leapfrog Bandit and the Green Lycanthrope. I personally designed these



Tino, Son of Scion sizes up his boney opponent.





two creatures, so I am very attached to them.

I love the soundtrack. It reminds me of the metal prevalent in Korean games like Kingdom Under Fire and films like 300.

Who performed the soundtrack?

Yusuke: We wanted to spotlight and focus on the player, and not so much on the creatures, so we tried to stay away from the common fantasy type music, and instead used industrial rock. This way, we feel it stimulates the players' competitiveness and create great battles. The artist is a Japanese musician, Inoue Nittoku

We've been playing with the standard deck and a "sizzle" deck. What other types of decks will follow? What exactly is a sizzle deck? Can players mix the two?

Mark: The standard deck is the "Starter Deck" that will come with The Eye of Judgment. Players will also get a booster pack that includes 8 cards of different rarities. The "sizzle" deck is just a collection of cards that we've been using to demo the game. It showcases a great variety of creature types, spells and abilities – without spoiling all the cards. Unfortunately the sizzle decks won't be available for sale. Strategically, we encourage players to customize their decks to match their playing style.

eBay here I come. Are all decks comprised of 30 cards?

Mark: Yes, 30 cards is the standard deck configuration. And we'll be watching...

What was the most challenging aspect of the game's development?

Felice: Character design and game balance has been most challenging. We spend a lot of time thinking of new creatures, some have special abilities some not so special, but the challenge is to find that balance so every card has its purpose.

Yusuke: The most challenging was by far trying to make a laboratory born CyberCode into a product, as well as maintaining the game balance as a TCG. CyberCode started out as a simple black and white barcode on paper, and we had to work from there to create not only an appealing TC product, but also with technically stable recognition in various environments. This was something we worked on until the very last minute. We also took a lot of time to create a game balance good enough to compete with the graphic impact of the game. We sought various advice and support over a long period of time to make the right adjustments.

In what ways are you utilizing the cells?

Yusuke: We allocated one of the seven SPEs in the CELL processor exclusively to validate and track the CyberCode. By doing this, we were able to process multiple CyberCodes at once.

How big a team? How long was the development?

Felice: We've been working on the game for a long time, but the game has been in my mind a lot longer. To be honest, our team in Japan isn't that big – only about 30 people. Fortunately, our SCEA, SCEE counterparts and Wizards of the Coast have helped streamline our development process with a global effort in mind.

Yusuke: The team at the maximum was 30 people, and it took us 3 years.

"...players can add more cards. Booster Packs and Pre-constructed theme decks will be sold by our partner, Wizards of the Coast."

-Mark Valledor, Product Manager




Obviously the game is designed to become a hobby or past time in its own right. Are you committed to the long term evolution of the game?

Mark: We already have plans to support the game with expansion packs and hundreds and hundreds of new cards. Working with Wizards of the Coast has been a great addition, too. They are the experts in the trading card business and this relationship will help us evolve the game as time goes on.

Yusuke: You are absolutely right, and we are very committed. We will continue to work to further develop The Eye of Judgment, but also work to make this 3D card battle into a new entertainment category.

I like the cloth mat supplied but it would be super cool to have a collectible leather mat. Are there any plans to market custom playing surfaces or does it have to be cloth?

Felice: The Battle Mat has been specifically designed in conjunction with the PlayStation Eye technology. The fabric is



a special non-reflective surface that balances the lighting around the cards making the cards themselves more readable. We also put great effort into finding a material that was waterproof so players get a long-lasting mat.

Yusuke: There are no current plans on making other playing mats. However, it's a really good idea. Perhaps if we make exclusive mats or function cards for players who win our events or tournaments, it will make them special.

Does Sony realize the potential here? This could be Sony's Pokémon. Are there plans to market it on TV and to the millions of geeks who live for this type of thing?

Yusuke: We sure do. I don't think we would be working with Hasbro/Wizards otherwise. Hopefully in time, as we achieve sales success we'll open more eyes internally – and hopefully run a TV campaign. That would be nice.

Thinking ahead you could use this technology to create card battles for brands like God of War, Jak and Daxter, Ratchet & Clank etc., or even licenses like Star Wars. Have there been any discussions?

Mark: Not yet, but hopefully The Eye of Judgment will start a new trend in gaming, opening this type of gameplay to new areas, including new and existing characters.

Regarding the technology, once we finish our game, I'm sure the final technology will be evaluated on a business level.

Yusuke: It really does make everyone think and imagine the possibilities of where this could go, doesn't it? The technology itself is very flexible. The first step though is making The Eye of Judgment a success, so that players all over the world will come to recognize this great technology. We will also begin to discuss how we can share this technology with other internal groups.

THEY KICKED ME IN THE TEETH,
TORE MY GIRLFRIEND IN HALF
AND TOOK AWAY THE SUN.
I'M GOING TO LONDON.

NiGHTS

Journey of Dreams

Shall we have some fun?

words Mike Griffin

an interesting NiGHTS rumor surfaced recently. It involved a sound clip from NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams that would indicate that our seemingly androgynous dream flyer may be leaning towards female status in the forthcoming Wii sequel. The NiGHTS voice had a soft British accent and a smooth, lulling tone. Maybe Sega is casting NiGHTS as a pseudo-maternal figure in Journey of Dreams, out to foil Wizeman the Wicked, big daddy of the Nightmares? This is the NiGHTS universe, after all; a day glow canvas of metaphors. If this is to be the asexual voice of reason for William and Helen, our pre-teen protagonists, may he or she speak freely.

Since our last NiGHTS: JoD preview, we've witnessed the events leading to Will and Helen's crossing over to Nightopian mindspace. Will is a soccer star in school and spends all his free time happily practising with his dad. Life is peachy. Suddenly Will's father has to go away and they no longer spend time together. Will becomes very sad and dreams himself into another world. Helen is well on her way to becoming a young violin sensation, every note lovingly taught to her by her mother, but she starts to grow into a young lass

and is distracted by new interests. Her violin is rarely used, and the relationship with her mother grows distant. As she realizes this, Helen regrets her choices, and her coping mechanism is also a dream delight. These kids are more screwed-up than the first dream duo, Elliot and Claris (set to make a cameo appearance), but it's an endearing, contemporary dysfunction.

To help heal the kids' mental ails and get them back on track with their parents, you'll wield the Wii nunchuk and Wiimote and trek through seven main levels and sprawling Nightmare boss encounters. Using the nunchuk's stick to fly NiGHTS (and B on the Wiimote to boost) could be the best solution for veterans of the original game and its Sega 3D Controller, but I'm not so puristic as to scoff the Wiimote flying scheme. The blissful

"The blissful feeling you get when moving the NiGHTS character should transcend interfaces."



feeling you get when moving the NiGHTS character should transcend interfaces. Journey of Dreams will feature two-player gameplay with battle and time attack-style modes, so everyone can settle the Stick vs. Remote flying debate in that arena.

The latest NiGHTS: JoD levels on display look fantastic. All the 3D blemishes that struggled beneath the brilliant style of the original game have been repaired. In The Dream of Desert level, we see how Will's Iдея (think of it as the energy that manifests each dreamscape) creates a vision of his loneliness and isolation. With the Wii's power and this engine's great draw distance, we can see far into the background to appreciate details like a giant beanstalk and floating TVs. Touch one of these screens and the entire desert morphs into a verdant oasis, sprouting a bounty of rings and items and altering NiGHTS' flight path. Sega has also briefly shown the Alps Chase level, featuring beautiful windmill islands,

cascading waterfalls and strange new variations of wildlife and Nightopians.

With regular dialog between the kids and NiGHTS and a friendly owl character driving a tutorial and hint system, Journey of Dreams is certainly going to lose some of the charming ambiguity of Sonic Team's first game, but hey—that was 11 years ago. Now we're flying through links to NiGHTS' past and future.

NiGHTS Journey of Dreams

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Sonic Team
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	December

preview



*They impaled my dog
and drenched everything in blood.
It's time to return some pain.
I'm going to LONDON!*

Godzilla Unleashed

Godzilla is approaching!

words Dave Halverson

Exclusive Wii games being as rare as a three-legged manatee, Godzilla is a welcome brawler on a system that desperately needs to show gamers that it's more than a GameCube with a funny controller; just as Unleashed needs to show fans that it's more than an extension of Save the Earth (the last installment on Xbox) in order to appease its base. True next-generation graphics, or at least as close as the Wii can get, would be a good place to start. The system has yet to produce anything that even comes close to top-tier Xbox games like Conker's Bad Fur Day, Oddworld Stranger's Wrath, Phantom Dust and so on, so the clock is ticking... loudly.

Looking at the initial roster, in which only King Caesar and Gigan appear new, I was shocked by the lack of new monsters in Unleashed. Aside from squeezing every drop of power out of the Wii, Pipeworks will also need to load Unleashed with more than a few new rubber suits to get Gojira fans back to the table. Fortunately, I always make it a point to let all of a game's demos count up to four. A good start, but with Hedorah, Space Godzilla, Monster X, and Gamera (to name a few) yet to appear (what the game really needs is Hedorah) there's certainly room for more.

Elsewhere, everything is looking



"...the Wiimote and Nunchuk seem tailor-made for marauding giant monsters."



King Caesar and Gigan get busy.

shipshape. While the graphics are nowhere near what they'd be on 360 or PS3 "sulk", they do best Save the Earth's by a hair, with slightly better textures, reflections, and water. I haven't seen enough of the game to go into detail but Godzilla fans should be pleased, and Wii fans overjoyed that someone has actually tapped into the console's middling abilities. Gameplay-wise the Wiimote and Nunchuk seem tailor-made for marauding giant monsters. Grabs, throws, tail whips, and various kicks and punches are well suited and easily performed on the remote, and a flick of the Nunchuck causes your monster to jump, rush, and block, with special moves conveniently nestled just above the analog stick. I also like the create-your-own scenario and new story features. Unleashed is looking good, plays great and for all I know they've hidden Hedorah in here somewhere. November's a ways away so I wouldn't be surprised if Atari has a few tricks up its green rubber sleeves.

Godzilla Unleashed

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Pipeworks Software Inc.
Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	1-4
Available	November

preview



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FIRST I'M GOING TO ~~COAT~~ COAT THE STREETS
WITH THEIR BILE, THEN I'M GOING TO STACK THEIR
ROTTEN DEMON CORPSES ON THE SIDEWALKS.
AND I'M GOING TO ENJOY IT.

I'M GOING TO LONDON.



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Games
for Windows



Clive Barker's JERICHO

Theatre of pain

words Brady Fiechter

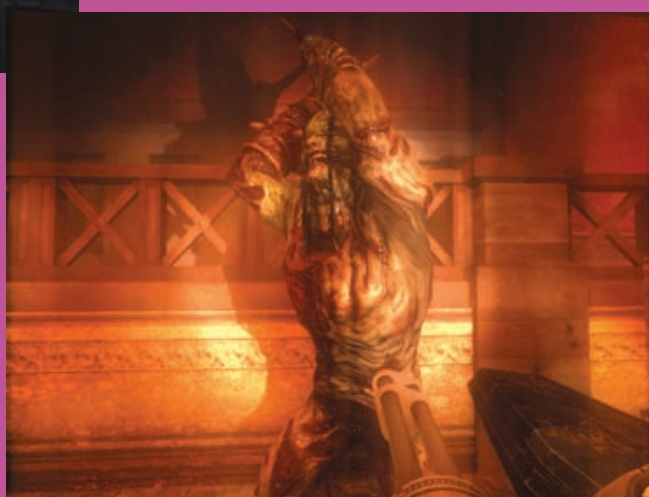
before unleashing the souls of little children into the fight, Maltheus asks me if I'd be interested in confessing my sins first. Confessing sins just doesn't jive in first-person shooters, so I chose to open fire instead and drop in a few grenades to finish the job. Maltheus isn't pleased, screaming out, "You dare attack me, you are warriors of Christ!"

Religious symbolism hangs thick in the halls of Clive Barker's Jericho, but it's not the peace of heaven that the game's interested in. This place is pure hell, decorated with torsos wrapped in barbed wire and shackled in chairs and strung up on walls. Most of the dead look like their skin has been dissolved by acid or charred in a horrible fire. Those that move and eventually die by your gunfire are

swept away by a swarm of flies. There are more shadows in the game than light, with every corner spilling forth fear and dread.

The action takes place in the middle eastern city of Al-Khali, which is represented throughout the ages of time as you travel from the modern era back to well before the birth of Christ. A unifying evil resurrects the horrors that have plagued the city in its many forms throughout history, drawing out Jericho's themes across everything from the Third Reich to the descendants of the Knights Templar. The enemies would seem to be more supernatural than remotely human—and occasionally vile. The morbidly obese Vicus confronts you while hanging on hooks by the fat of his shoulders, his belly opening up to unleash a shower of poisonous blood. Facing the madness of Jericho falls

Uh, I think it's time to pull that trigger.

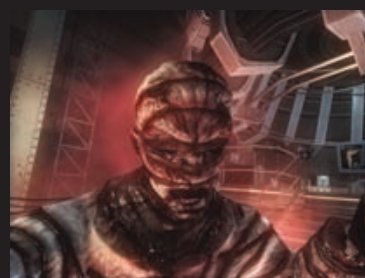


"The morbidly obese Vicus confronts you while hanging on hooks by the fat of his shoulders."



on the shoulders of a squad of seven, who will often break order and leave you with a smaller selection to control at a time. Every member is equipped with a gun that falls within their specific skill set, and possess a pair of special powers that are used for attacks as well as navigating the environments. Everything from telekinesis to time distortion to ghost bullets are part of the arsenal. The visual payoff for certain attacks are very cool, like the blood ward technique that begins with the character Church drawing blood and casting out a swirling mass of energy, which extends a wave of tentacles out to paralyze an enemy.

With horror director Clive Barker's influences all over Jericho, the game is a bold statement in atmosphere. Just the contraptions alone that hang from the walls and grind away in the corners feel like they hold no other purpose than to be evil. As much as Barker believes in the medium, he definitely has the presentation part in his corner...



Clive Barker's Jericho

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Mercury Steam
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	1-8
Available	October

preview

"One of The Best Anime Movies Ever."

-Eric Nakamura/*Giant Robot Magazine*



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Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy

Killing on the run

words Brady Fichter

Jason Bourne is a trained killer, ruthless and efficient. I know this for certain, because I watched him do his unpleasant work in three powerhouse Hollywood movies and have just begun reading about it in his novels. All of this inspiration has led to the gaming version of Bourne's violent pursuits, called Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy.

Bourne is good at leaving a trail of death in his wake, but calling him ruthless may be misjudging a character who seems to possess an ambiguous moral compass. Part of the Bourne mystery is watching his fuzzy memory of a past life slowly come together, as he searches for the truth of who he really is—and who made him who he is now. The government's a key player in the whole mess, so you know something fishy's roiling underneath it all.

What we have here is a great opportunity for a gaming franchise. Unlike the slick, techy exploits of a James Bond, Bourne is dirtier version of special agent. His tools of destruction are anything he can get his hands on in the heat of the moment. And most of the time, those tools are his fists. When an enemy is in range, you'll pop into fight mode, utilizing a light, heavy and block button for the main sequence of attacks. Combinations help build an adrenaline meter, which leads to an eventual takedown opportunity.

With takedowns, the environment now becomes the weapon. Picture frames, railings, fire hydrants, tables—if something looks blunt, sharp, protruding or hard, someone's face belongs smashed into it. And that someone's face is shown in nicely mangled detail afterwards. To

execute the most brutal attacks and take out a group of thugs in one smooth chain of blows, quick-time events frame the action. Mess up the button timing and you'll fall back into regular brawl mode.

Here is where you really start to consume the cinematic energy of the presentation. The camera is frantically cutting up the action, mirroring director Paul Greengrass' flashbulb style in the films. There's so much shifting between controlled and scripted action you begin to lose focus on which is which from simply observing the game in motion.

When Bourne isn't the one tracking a target, he becomes the one on the run, going up against the clock as he makes his way through rooms, out windows, across power lines and anything else that serves as an exit point. While hand-to-hand dispatches were the showcase of the demo, gunplay takes equal precedence if you so choose. Obviously specific situations call for specific tactics: the guards hanging out behind the cargo crates in the docks needed shot down with a pistol, beginning with the splintering of their cover spot with a few well placed bullets. Keeping with the apoplectic pacing, weapons play is also abrupt, climaxing with shooting takedowns.

Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	High Moon Studios
Publisher	Sierra Entertainment
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	2008



"His tools of destruction are anything he can get his hands on in the heat of the moment."

It's like he was Bourne to do this.

BLEACH

Shattered Blade

Without a wrist-strap, it's Shattered Screen

words Heather Campbell

After previewing the miserable *Mortal Kombat* for the Wii, and suffering through the tacked-on controls of *Guilty Gear Accent Core*, I was worried about the *Bleach* Wii fighter from Polygon Magic. The Wii seems unfortunately appropriate for party games and gimmick titles...to the disappointment of hardcore gamers the world over. (Hopefully, with the installed user base now larger than that of the 360, more intricate games will arrive on Nintendo's renaissance system.)

Luckily, *Bleach: Shattered Blade* seems to have taken the Wii's shortcomings as development guidelines, and the resultant game is both genuine Wii title and Fighter. By focusing only on weaponry, *Bleach* Wii comes off like a speedy, streamlined *Twilight Princess* combat game, with more specific weaponry and combos in battle. After all, the Wiimote is a stick. For control metaphors, the Wiimote works best when mapped over the actions of a sword, not when clumsily translated into the punches and kicks of a traditional brawler.

So far, *Bleach: Shattered Blade* is the best fighting game I've played on the Wii. I'm not the biggest fan of *Bleach*; I watch the show when I get a chance, but haven't given it the fabled attention that I've reserved for other shonen titles. The nice thing is, though the game pays keen attention to the series' details, it's not restrictively off-putting for fans of versus games.

Bleach fans will want to take note of the original branching storyline, as well as the Wii-exclusive new character designed by manga author Tite Kubo. Thirty-two familiar characters are included

BLEACH 101

Bleach is a complicated combat-opera that follows the lives of Ichigo Kurosaki and Rukia Kuchiki. High school student Ichigo takes on the powers of a Death God (Soul Reaper) when he finds Rukia pinned down by an evil spirit known as a Hollow. Unfortunately, the transfer of power between Rukia and Ichigo is forbidden, and they soon find themselves caught up in the politics of Soul Society—an otherworld where Soul Reapers work and live. Ichigo has to unlock the very limits of his potential in order to save Rukia from punishment—a goal made more difficult by the sinister forces working to expedite her execution.

in the game, and each is voiced by their proper American dubber. In a small but welcome bonus, game dialogue changes depending on the match-up of the fight: if characters on-screen are known for their charged relationship, the voice-over will reflect it. What's more, even though the voices and lip-flaps don't match up, the acting's not half-bad.

With some of the nicest cel-shading the Wii has to offer, the whole package comes off as an A-level license, instead of the often-times miserable anime tie-ins that clog our consoles. Look for it this fall, with the *Bleach* DS game in tow.

"By focusing only on weaponry, *Bleach* Wii comes off like a speedy, streamlined *Twilight Princess* combat game..."



Bleach: Shattered Blade

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Polygon Magic
Publisher	Sega
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	Fall 2007



Guitar Hero III

In the absence of Hammer Time, it is indeed time to rock out...

words Greg Orlando

Rock icon Slash, surprisingly sober for the occasion, stormed into Activision's press conference at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo. He was there, of course, to promote *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock*, in which he is a playable character.

Sadly, unfunny comic Jamie Kennedy was at the event, too. Kennedy, who seemed genuinely clueless about why he was hired to serve as emcee for a video game press conference, was genuinely clueless as to why he was hired to serve as an emcee for a video game press conference. And, faced with the prospect of dealing with Kennedy the dullard, Slash had no recourse but to light up in the face of Santa Monica's anti-smoking laws. In truth, more powerful substances were needed to detract from Kennedy's leering, smarmy, decidedly unfunny antics.

"Of all the things I've been involved in, outside of being in a band, this is the coolest," Slash said.

Slash, whose real name is Saul Hudson, will initially be a boss character in *Legends of Rock*. At some point in the game, Slash will challenge players to a rock duel in a sort of battle mode. The goal will be to outdo Slash while playing a piece of music he created specifically for *Legends of Rock*. Here, players must hit enough notes correctly in order to activate their Star Power (by raising the

"Of all the things I've been involved in, outside of being in a band, this is the coolest."

~Slash

neck of their *Guitar Hero* controller) and thus unleash special attacks on their opponents. These attacks impede an opposing player's rocking by, among other things, increasing the difficulty level, breaking a guitar string, blurring upcoming musical notes, and so forth. Beating Slash unlocks him as a playable character and, as a neat bonus, unlocks Guns n' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle."

Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine will be the game's second legendary boss, and the game's developer NeverSoft is creating a fictional rock god to complete the triumvirate of bosses. As either an added bonus or, perhaps, torment, former hair band icon Bret Michaels (he of the reality show "Rock of Love") will be included in the game. Michaels, apparently, will be a non-playable singer, appearing during the Poison song "Talk Dirty to Me" and his solo number "Go That Far."

An excellent list of most rocktastic songs rounds out *Legends of Rock*. Currently, the list of songs hovers at about 45 and includes Pearl Jam's "Even Flow," Metallica's "One," The Rolling

A major graphics overhaul fills the arena.



Stones' "Paint it Black," the Beastie Boys' "Sabotage," "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath, and "Rock and Roll All Nite" by KISS.

As a neat final tip of the hat to rock gods everywhere, Activision will be releasing a host of new, wireless guitar controllers for the Xbox 360, Wii, PlayStation 3, and PlayStation 2. The next-generation consoles will receive Gibson Les Paul facsimiles, while the PlayStation 2 controller is modeled after the Kramer Pacer.

Guitar Hero III Legends of Rock

System(s)	PS3, PS2, Xbox 360, Wii
Developer	NeverSoft
Publisher	Activision
Online/Multi	NA
Available	October



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Wii

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“The game is absolutely in love with carnage and hack ‘n’ slash action...”

CONAN

Pure barbarism

words Brady Fiechter

Conan's angry. He can't even drink from the life-giving health jars scattered throughout Cimmeria without shattering them to the ground in disgust. He's also got contempt for pretty much anyone he comes in contact with, even if that someone is the breezily dressed warrior queen, who is told, "I'll do what I please, woman." The pair eventually play nice and get to know each other better in the queen's lavishly decorated quarters.

When he's not making love or rescuing the many naked women tied up throughout the land, Conan's making one-man war with a variety of beasts and natives. Stone statues come to life, lions leap from the shadows, pirates cast arrows from above, giant apes pound their chest in fury—and all die with equal gusto. Conan slices off limbs and heads, rips out guts, eviscerates entire groups with one swing of whatever weapon he happens to have in hand at the time. If the killing spree continues with a mighty skill, slow motion attacks reward the depictions of death with even more visceral kick.

Every level ends with a rating system, judging categories like objects destroyed, deaths, dominant combo used and even how many limbs have been removed from the enemy. The game is absolutely in love with carnage and hack 'n' slash action, but there's much more here to gauge than merely how many enemies fell under your

blade in a single level.

The move set available is actually quite enormous for a game like this, complicated by the fact that Conan's techniques change whether using shield, one-handed, two-handed or dual-bladed attacks. A variety of sizes and makes of blades are left behind after a kill, so all you have to do for a new weapon is tap a button for an immediate pick-up. More formidable foes take specific weapon types to break through their blocks, adding a nice element

of strategy that extends beyond simply finding the best strike in your arsenal. I found myself constantly dropping and switching weapons, never resorting to the same drawn-out attack patterns. The better you are at mastering certain weapons and moves, the more reward you'll get with experience and added growth to the subsets of attacks.

In addition to the rune system—you can acquire this currency of red juice by destroying objects as well—an armor meter

**It's a simple plan.
Just kill the thing
and move on.**





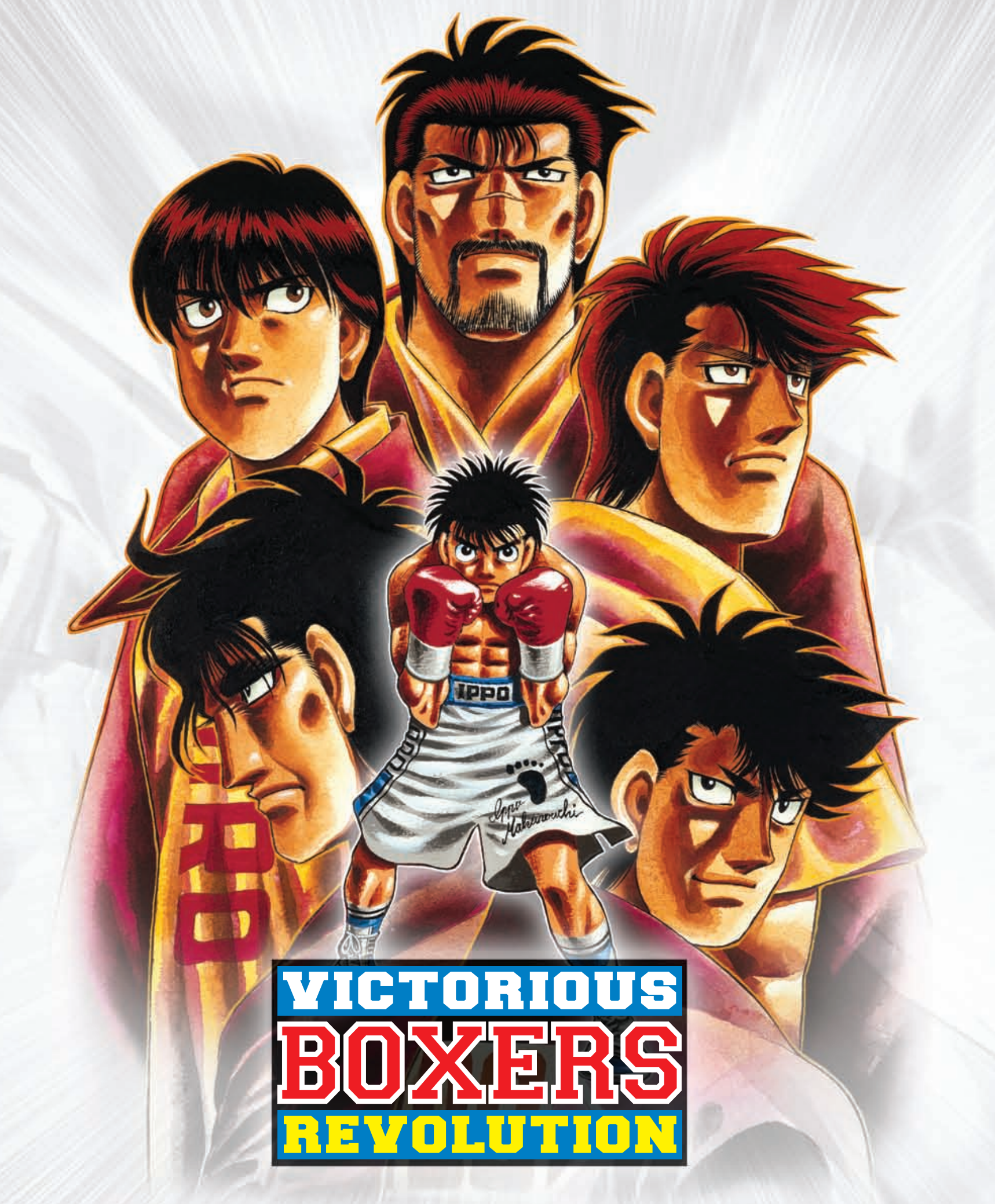
builds and reveals layers of new powers after taking down bosses. Early on, you'll earn the ability to freeze groups of enemies into stone, and call down a storm of fire to torch the area. If you're really good and can maintain attack links, a rage meter will eventually fill you with unstoppable strength. The game does a particular fine job here of making the reward of your skilled labor well worth it.

Images of God of War will be immediately dancing in your head in regards to a lot of the Conan experience, but this is not an insult as much as an acceptable fact given the genre and setting the game is working in. Whatever Conan's inspirations, it does some things very well. A consistent part of the level progression involves all kinds of quick-time events, whether opening a door, setting up a catapult, knocking over a tower or facing the more dramatic moments of a boss

fight (the several-minute long confrontation with the Sand Dragon really shows off the ability of the game to mix gameplay with spectacle). There's a good deal of platforming—climb around rocky ledges while avoiding spilling sand traps—and puzzle solving—raise a series of platforms and create a wind current to open up even more platforms—and within each sequence button prompts will often come up to lend more attention to the presentation part of the gameplay path.

Conan		preview
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360	
Developer	Nihilistic	
Publisher	THQ	
Available	October	

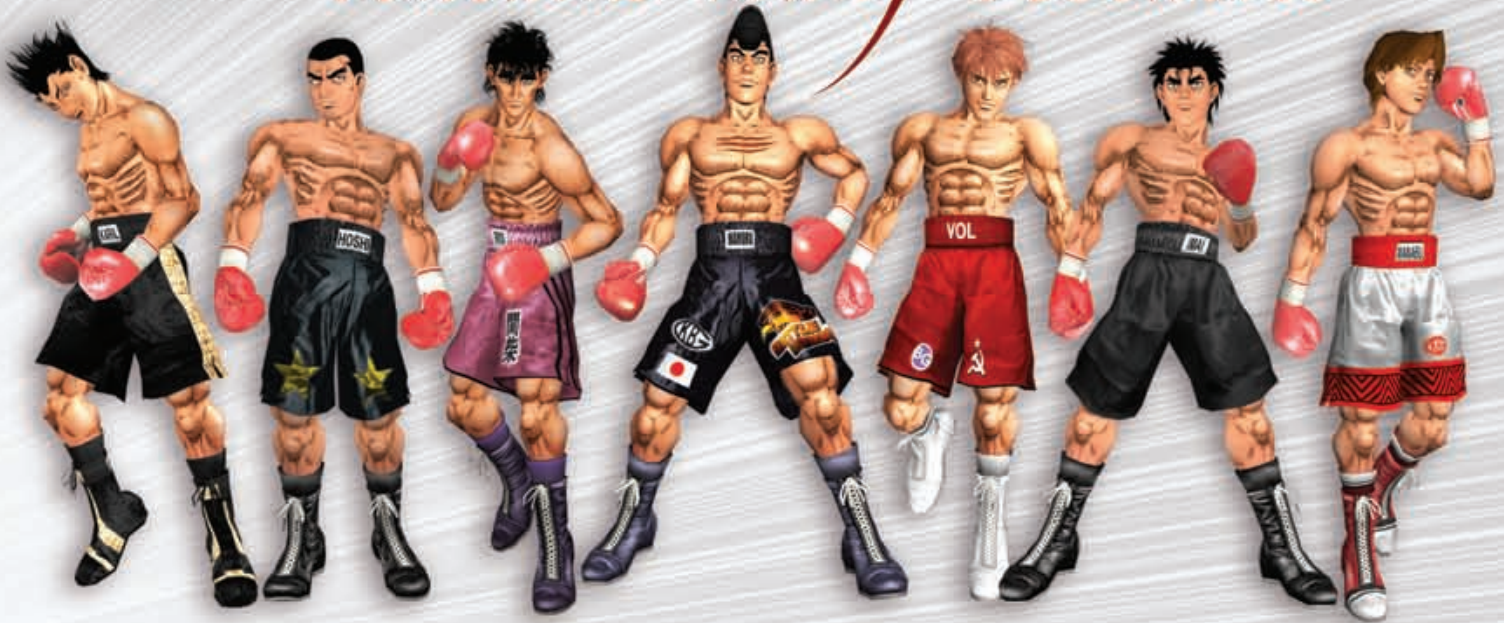




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wii™



TimeShift

Into the unknown...

words Brady Fiechter

apparently the new way of judging how next-gen a next-gen game really is must now start with how cool the setting looks drenched in rain. Fortunately for TimeShift, it gets high marks, because that first level has a lot of rain, and man does it look good.

For a game that's been a misplaced curiosity for quite some time now, it's good to know at least the technology has shaped up nicely. But it's more than that nifty rain dialing up the mood that caught my eye. TimeShift's art style, which has been transformed from more obscure steam punk to a dystopian grunge, doesn't initially come off as hackneyed in the face of an obvious push for more accessibility. We get a lot of cities in collapse and a trigger-friendly military pushing all the demise to the breaking point, but as TimeShift opens, the scene feels convincing and exciting. I was hooked.

You begin the game without a weapon, but quickly enough the familiar FPS firepower is in your hands as the room you're in gets ripped apart by a giant mech-like unit taking up position outside. The running-and-gunning continues in full force, taking you through claustrophobic

bombed-out buildings and into the equally decimated city streets. I still feel like I don't have a proper sense of the time-manipulating components of the gameplay and just how far the developers are taking them, but overall: so far so good.

There's a simplicity that's replaced the original design vision to make TimeShift more of a puzzle-oriented shooter. Time can be slowed, reversed, or stopped completely, all with the press of a single button and aid of a contextual activation system. Even if, say, stopping time is mostly employed to get a more calculated shot off on the enemy, it's handled well and adds increased satisfaction to the kill. And looks gruesome in the process.

The time powers are a big part of multiplayer, showcased in the use of special time grenades. These are temporal traps, which establish a bubble of space that either you or your opponent can get caught up in. There's something very satisfying about unloading into a helplessly frozen victim with a shotgun or running up and stealing one away for a sudden kill.

Ironically, time has been good to TimeShift.



"...as TimeShift opens, the scene feels convincing and exciting. I was hooked."

TimeShift	
System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Saber Interactive
Publisher	Sierra
Available	October





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XBOX 360 LIVE

Prototype

There's a new killer in town

words Brady Fechter

In the grizzly new action adventure Prototype, developer Radical Entertainment pointed out that there will be many “new ways to kick some f***ing ass.” On top of kicking ass, there’s also the goal to provide you the “ultimate power fantasy.” One such way of accomplishing this involves pounding the ground in front of you, calling forth a mound of spikes that rise up and impale anything that happens to be in your line of sight.

The “you” in the moment could be anyone you choose to kill and absorb into a swirl of blood and liquid flesh, as you violently become your newest form and move on to the next slaughter house. With the military on your tail, that power fantasy continues when you jump into a helicopter, smash the pilot’s face into the cockpit glass and take control. If you’d prefer the grounding force of a tank, then rip open the hatch, jump in—as you disappear inside, a geyser of blood sprays forth—and a brand new war machine is all yours. For the more direct approach to destruction, the three giant claws that serve as fingers also seem to work quite well at ripping bodies apart.

Being able to shapeshift into

“For the more direct approach to destruction, the three giant claws that serve as fingers also seem to work quite well...”

anyone you come into contact with has advantages over conspicuously walking around with those grotesque hands. Sometimes a little stealth is in order, sometimes you might want to blend in and assess the situation before lopping off heads. But as Alex Mercer, he who believes not in mercy—“the darkest antihero in gaming”—dealing with your amnesia doesn’t appear to require quiet surveillance. Looking like Crackdown on crack, your character can rush up skyscrapers and leap from rooftop to

rooftop with prodigious speed, tracking the next open-world target with evil precision. The manic locomotion of the character is kept in constant flow, automatically interacting with large objects you may come in contact with on the run.

The viral outbreak that might or might not be the direct cause of Alex’s strange powers and his willingness to viciously attack anything in his way sets the scene for the chaotic New York. The city evolves along with the path of your character, crumbling into increasing ruin

throughout the progress of the story. Radical proclaims the game will tackle real issues that mirror a modern world and the conspiracies that feed our fiction.

Prototype

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Radical Entertainment
Publisher	Sierra
Online/Multi	TBA
Available	2008

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the blockheads are back, and they're waging war once again in a galaxy far, far away. This time, LucasArts has taken the first two Lego Star Wars titles and mashed them together with some brand-new content, a little extra polish, some Wii-wagging action, and online play for the grand amalgamation known as The Complete Saga.

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga compiles all six *Star Wars* movies (including, unfortunately, the ones that stunk like a New Jersey dumpster) in one package. All the game levels and all the characters, of course, are done up Lego-style, with blocklike *Star Wars* heroes and villains running through destructible environments in an adventure that's equal parts shooter and 3D platformer.

Players, either singularly or with a friend in cooperative or online-based play, can enjoy sticking it to the evil Galactic Empire and whoever the hell was the villainous conglomerate in the series' lamentable prequels. Players can swap out characters at will to effectively, say, access panels to unlock doors, use the Force to lift objects and assemble platforms, crawl through tiny panels to reach new areas, jump exceedingly high, etc. While running

through the levels, players can also collect a copious amount of colored doodads that serve as currency to unlock new blockheaded heroes and villains, as well as vehicle parts to assemble some of the series' notable craft.

Among the scenarios highlighted are Luke, Han, and Leia's escape from the Death Star; the epic battle on Hoth; Luke and R2-D2's exploration of Dagobah; the destruction of Death Star in *A New Hope* and *Return of the Jedi*; and lightsaber duels featuring Luke and Vader, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker, and Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan, and Darth Maul. Each of the scenarios, and there are 36 total in the game's story mode, can be replayed with different characters in order to reach previously blocked off areas.

“The blockheads are back, and they’re waging war once again in a galaxy far, far away.”

This is some goofy fun to be had, and even players of the previous versions might want to give Complete Saga a look. For one thing, developer Traveller's Tales has gone back to the prequel segments and added in elements such as melee attacks for all the characters. Sequences such as the chase of the bounty hunter Zam Wessell (as seen in the odious *Attack of the Clones*) has tacked on, too, and bit players such as Wessell, Boss Nass, and Watto are now unlockable characters. And with all this plus assorted bonus levels, new bounty hunter missions, and a special bit of goodness LucasArts has sworn



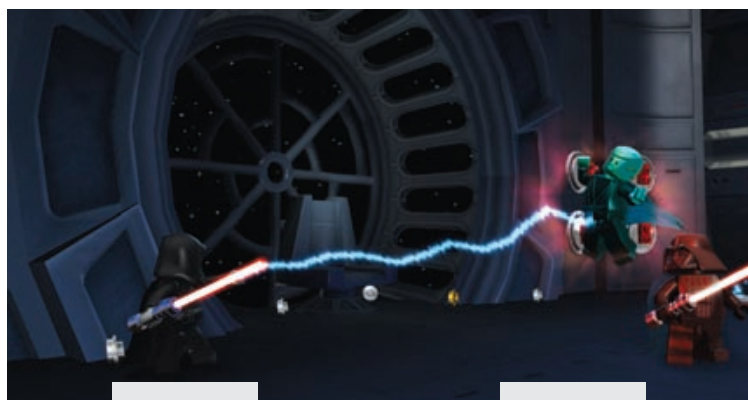
Alright you two; back in the box...



game writers to secrecy about, and it just may be that everything old is indeed new again. Which is, to be fair, a most intriguing proposition.

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga

System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, Nintendo DS
Developer	Traveller's Tales
Publisher	LucasArts
Available	November



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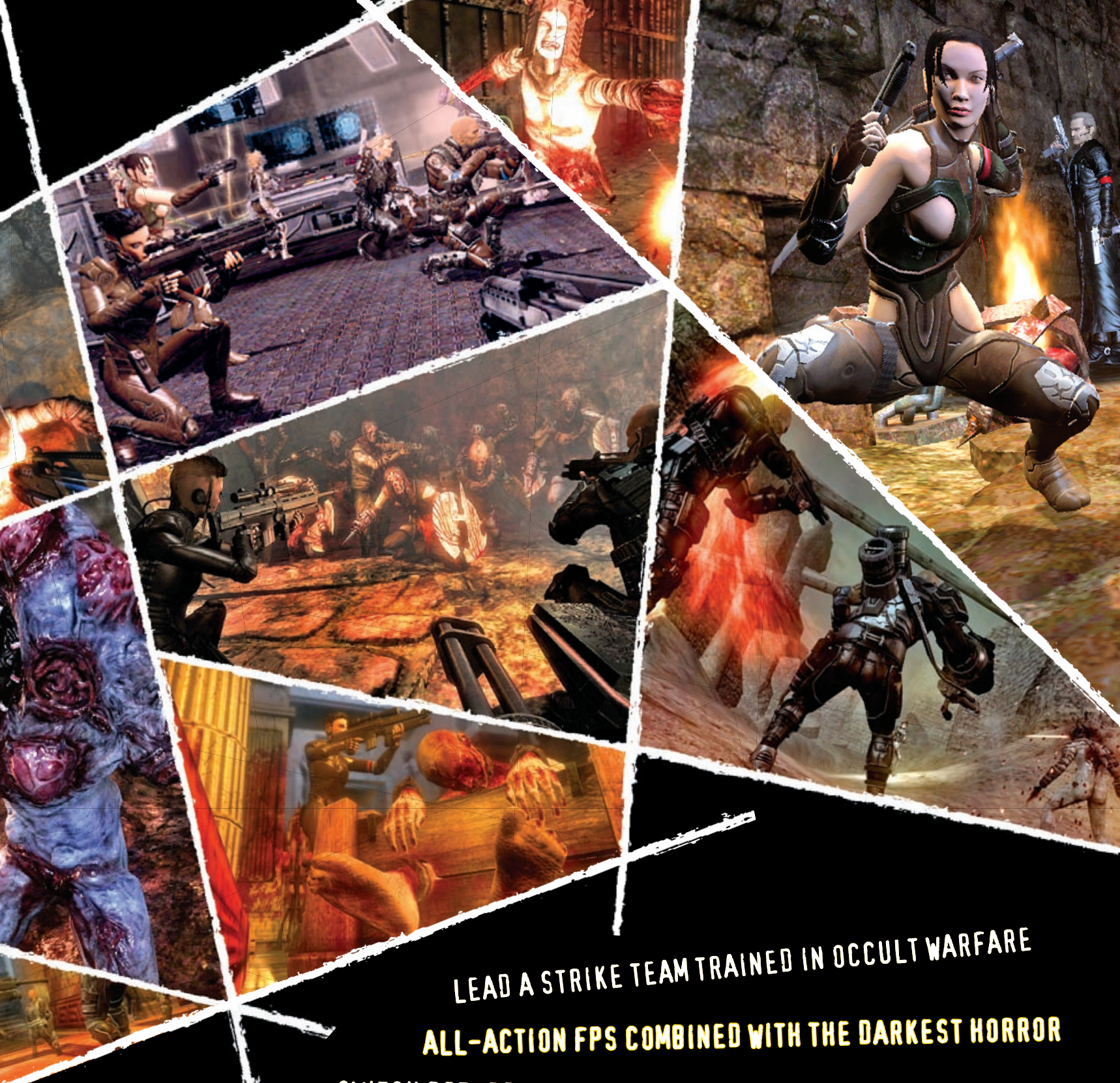
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purveyors of all things Rome including the surprising *Spartan Total Warrior* for PS2, The Creative Assembly have turned their attention to the world of Norse mythology with their first next-gen title, *Viking: Battle for Asgard*. The game follows the plight of Skarin, a powerful yet imperfect Viking warrior as he endeavors to stop the Goddess Hel and her demon army from enslaving the mortal realm of Midgard and ultimately provoking Ragnarok, triggering an apocalyptic battle that would destroy even the gods themselves. True to one of the most brutal mythological periods in fake history, body parts will fly as Skarin explores the game's vast open-world environments freeing enslaved warriors to embark in epic battles teeming with all manner of mythological beasts from colossal giants, to the gods' own champions. Skarin is also a dragon master with the ability to tame and utilize dragons in battle. Sounds amazing, yes? We thought so too, so we dug a bit further...

Viking: Battle for Asgard

preview

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	The Creative Assembly
Publisher	Sega
Available	Spring 2008

Viking: Battle for Asgard

He will rock you

words Dave Halverson

interview

Q&A with The Creative Assembly

Aside from *Spartan Total Warrior* (great game by the way) TCA has its roots in the RTS genre. Did *Spartan* give you the console bug?

We certainly learnt a lot from the experience of creating *Spartan* and with the added power of next-gen consoles, we knew we had the opportunity to take advantage of the leap in technology. We can now achieve a whole world of things that we simply couldn't before. The size of the world we're creating for *Viking: Battle for Asgard*, the free-roaming nature of the exploration we're allowing, the sheer scale of the battles and of course, the overall look of the game are things that only the next-gen can allow us to achieve.

Looking at other open-world epics like *Kingdom Under Fire* or *Dynasty Warriors*, how would you say your game model compares, if at all? Is this a more produced game? It looks incredibly cinematic. In certain screens it looks very similar to *Spartan*...

Viking: Battle for Asgard is definitely not an evolution of *Spartan*—it is a completely different game and concept. The only real thing we took from *Spartan* were the lessons learned. *Viking* is an immensely ambitious game, which of course takes advantage of the next-gen consoles. There's a huge free-roaming world with real, living breathing Vikings—allies and enemies. There are enormous Nordic locations to explore, and a variety of things to do on each island that ultimately lead you to the truly massive battles—which are without doubt, a hugely cinematic spectacle. It's a unique journey that really pushes visual boundaries but at the same time a true player-driven experience. We give the player the world, the tools and the objectives to achieve but it's up to the player how they go about achieving their aims.

Do you have a lead platform or will you develop to each console's strengths? Having seen in *Heavenly Sword* the kind of real facial emotion the PS3 can muster you must be itching to make your characters emote the kind of raw intensity we've yet to see from a Norse mythology epic.

Of course, we develop individually on each console and we'll look to take advantage

Skarin doesn't know the meaning of cut and run.



of the unique strengths and differences they provide. Viking is a character-driven story, and as such we've made the storyline as compelling as possible. We use the rich Nordic myth as a backdrop, and set the characters in a brutal world of bloody warfare and fantastical legends. We'll be talking more about Skarin and the other characters in the game in the months ahead as well as revealing more on how we're going to tell the story behind the game.

Speaking of brutal, I take it appendages fly. How bloody does it get? Are we talking realistic axe and mallet meets flesh and bone?

Oh, it gets bloody alright. We've gone for a really gritty, visceral feel to the combat: when sword or axe meets bone, it stops.

There's none of this "wire-fu," sweeping arcing swords that simply slice through opponents with no visual damage; we're really taking the decapitations and slicing and dicing to the extreme! The key however, is that the player has total control over these moves, building up a momentum of attacks to open up more devastating, often fatal attacks, while also powering up your Special Moves. Using our combat system, you'll be able to orchestrate each fight against single or groups of opponents, blow by blow. Limbs fly, heads get lopped off, and Legion troops are cleft in twain—and there's even a headbut move.

We know about the lead character Skarin and the Goddess Hel and her demonic minions, but is this a

"It's a unique journey that really pushes visual boundaries but at the same time a true player-driven experience."

character-rich tale? How deep a story is involved? Is it a man's war or do you introduce any heroines?

This is very much a character-rich tale. The story of Skarin and in particular his position in the relationship between Freya and Hel is something that unfolds throughout the game. Norse Mythology is fascinating in this way—the relationship between mortals and their gods and the way in which the gods intervene with the mortal realms and act out their feuds there. In particular, the politics and the past between Freya and Hel is something that underpins the action of this game and is revealed to the player throughout. While Skarin is very much the Warrior on Midgard, he is to a great extent a man caught up between and at the mercy of two warring Goddesses in Asgard.

Our brief mentioned dragons. Do they take flight? Do we get to ride?

The dragons are residents of Midgard, having long since lost their Asgardian connections. They do indeed take flight and while we don't have plans to allow Skarin to jump aboard, as long as you provide the right conditions for them,

you can call them into battle to execute a series of increasingly devastating attacks on the enemy-occupied settlements. They are spectacular beasts which get more and more powerful as you progress throughout the game and explore Midgard to the full.

What other types of beasts might we encounter? Are there multiple beasts to ride?

There are other Norse-influenced creatures, but we don't want to spoil the fun and surprise for you right now. We'll bring you more details of some of the other enemies and creatures you'll face in the month's ahead.

How about bosses? Are you going big pattern-based behemoths or more human?

There are not boss battles per se— in many ways our huge battles are Viking's boss battles. Having said that, there is one main antagonist that Skarin must take on throughout the game— Hel's Harbinger— her own Champion on Midgard. In addition, Hel's Legion and Hel herself have a few tricks up their sleeve and will throw all sorts at you.



“We’re giving the player total freedom to decide their methods and play out these quests the way they want.”

What’s your gameplay model like in terms of means of progression and how the game evolves? Is it mission and/or task based?

There are missions and tasks to do within the game that recruit Vikings into your growing army, liberate settlements and their resources across the levels to allow you access to siege weapons, health, flame pots, and many other items. There is progression in everything in one form or another: Skarín must learn new moves from the Elders at dueling rings around Midgard as the game progresses, as well as upgrading his sword with embedded runes and so harnessing the power of the elements. The dragons you meet across the islands become stronger and more ferocious. As the game progresses Skarín’s methods of influencing the mass battles—turning the tide—also changes and the options available to him become more diverse. Players will really have to think about each new situation and what best way to forge ahead.

What about move sets? Does Skarín evolve via an action-RPG like system or is it more streamlined? Any context-sensitive God of War-type content?

Skarín learns new moves as the game

progresses via the dueling rings that can be found around Midgard. These allow for Skarín to extend his range of moves. In addition there are magical weapons and attacks that are upgradable which in turn offer new attack moves. There are plans for a certain amount of context-sensitive moves but at the same time we want to ensure that this is not overdone and that our combat remains grounded in reality and is brutally realistic.

So, good ol’ axe and sword. What about ranged?

The ranged and melee effects come about as a result simply of how close you are to the enemy, so the same two weapons (sword and axe—classic Viking weapons) can perform a whole array of different brutal attacks, from staving in a Legions’ head from behind with the back of the axe, to a long-ranged “dash” attack where you run in and bring both weapons together to decapitate an enemy. In addition, Skarín has throwing axes and flametots—burning oil grenades that can take out individuals or groups of Legion.

Is there a monetary system to purchase weapons and armor or does he pick them up along the way?

There is a monetary system, as well as a



Skarín drives his blade clean through a lone demon. Bloody good.

general inventory system, allowing you to pick up and collect certain items for sale, trade or upgrading.

What about healing? Does health regenerate Halo-style or are you using meat or potions?

We have health packs around the world, as well as instant healing systems such as potions and healing via Viking shaman.

What are you going for musically? More epic symphony or grinding metal?

It’s beautifully arranged epic symphony—something that really evokes the immense nature of the Viking myths, and the splendor and majestic nature of the Nordic environment. We’re also using sound intelligently in general—it’s not simply there as a nice-sounding backdrop, it also alerts you to the presence of certain things, or varying states of play, or the intensity of battle.

Is the game straight action or does Skarín have a jump to negotiate varied terrain and architecture?

There is a variety of gameplay, from athletic traversal across the environment to reach new areas or sneak past the enemy, to deciding which is the best path of attack on an occupied quarry and equipping yourself correctly for the task ahead. There are missions that encourage you to act more stealthily—for example, when

infiltrating an occupied settlement to bomb their barracks and decimate their army. The player is not encouraged to wade in and fight hundreds of men but at the same time we’re giving the player total freedom to decide their methods and play out these quests the way they want.

How long have you been working on the game? How much more difficult is it to produce a next-gen product. Have you had to bolster the team?

The game has been in development for over a year and a half now, all the time pushing the boundaries of our knowledge and the capabilities of the next-gen consoles. When we were producing *Spartan* it was a next-gen project at the time, so it’s not like we haven’t worked on a new console before. We have a great team of highly talented and creative individuals, all of whom have made the development process a smooth and exciting process.

Well, there are few things more fulfilling than the down and dirty bone crunching fury of Norse mythology. Especially if you throw in some fan service! How soon will we be crackin’ skulls?

You can expect to find it in your local shops around the Spring of 2008. Get your axes sharp and ready to go!

Well... the game looks utterly fantastic—best of luck down the home stretch!

Thanks very much. We can’t wait to let people get their hands on the game to begin the carnage and lead the charge.



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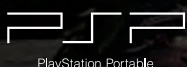
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Bladestorm

The Hundred Years' War

Just in case you didn't get enough Joan of Arc from Jeanne d'Arc

words Casey Loe

Once upon a time, Koei was known for making historical strategy games that were so complicated that they alienated all but a small group of hardcore fans. Nowadays, Koei is known for making thrice-yearly iterations of the Dynasty Warriors series that are so shallow and repetitive they've alienated all but another small group of hardcore fans. Mercifully, Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War falls directly between Koei's two legacies, adding actual strategic depth to the pick-up-and-play brawling of Dynasty Warriors.

You begin the game by creating a character who will serve as a mercenary in the Hundred Years' War. You can accept jobs on either side of the conflict, serving either England or France faithfully, or jumping from one side to the other in search of wealth and fame. On the battlefield, your hero is the only character you have complete control over, but you won't be able to accomplish much by your lonesome. Instead, your goal is to find a squad of allied infantrymen, archers or cavaliers, take command of them, and lead them into battle. On the battlefield, Bladestorm uses the soldier-archer-cavalier game of rock-paper-scissors that is so often at the heart of strategy games (which was actually born from the Hundred Years' War), but it gets progressively more nuanced as the game introduces concepts like polearms versus blades, bows versus crossbows, and even some not-quite-historically-accurate spellcasting units. Much of the strategy is determined between battles, when you can spend your loot to upgrade your hero, buy new weapons for a unit, or hire a standing army of your own. You can also use the skill points earned from commanding each unit type to boost that type's stats or upgrade its special abilities.

Those hoping for a western-themed Dynasty Warriors may be disappointed at how little control a player has over his or

No fair! They've got camels!

"...Koei may have finally hit the sweet spot between historical sims and battlefield brawlers."

her hero—combat is entirely automated, you simply move your character and give orders. But by trading visceral thrills for deeper simulation elements, Koei may have finally hit the sweet spot between historical sims and battlefield brawlers.



Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Developer	Omega Force
Publisher	Koei
Available	Winter 2007

preview

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Kingdom Under Fire

Circle of Doom

Thy Kingdom come

words Dave Halverson

I like a genre-busting WMD, the Kingdom Under Fire franchise is about to strike again. Originally deployed to slay the swarming militia action category made famous by Dynasty Warriors (which it did handily while innovating in the areas of in-game cinematics and deployment), Blueside has now set its sights on yet another genre past its sell-by date—the traditional action/RPG made famous by the Dungeons and Dragons, Baldur's Gate and Untold Legends series.

While the general framework remains the same—gathering and equipping potions and arms dropped by marauding hordes, dispersing earned points to evolve your character attributes, managing all the inventory you can carry, and murdering everything in your path—the way in which it's presented and

balanced has been skillfully overhauled. For one the camera is fixed in a more traditional third-person manner giving the game a Fable-like feel using ranged weapons to pick off unsuspecting legions and sizing up the terrain ahead. They've also upped the RPG ante by attaching usage parameters and synthesis to the game's weapons, and fashioned a dream state designed to further the story, outline missions, and gain the wisdom needed to master the ever evolving quiver of spells and special moves. The end result is pure magic, whether you engage in a four-player game over Live or on your own, thanks in no small part to Blueside's stock-in-trade—a level of art and character design that is second to none. We caught up with our old pal Henry Lee for the full story behind the team's latest epic...

Kingdom Under Fire Circle of Doom

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Blueside
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	4-player co-op
Available	Winter 2007

preview

Interview

Henry Lee, video game director, Blueside,
Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom

Play: Is *Circle of Doom* somewhat like Blueside's take on action/RPGs like *Baldur's Gate*, *Fable* and *PSU* made original by your unmistakable imprint? Any influence there?

Henry Lee: I've been influenced by so many titles that it's all a big mish-mash inside my head.

Circle of Doom is a long way from the first two games in the franchise. Is this the new direction for the series or a spin-off similar to what *Dirge of Cerberus* is to *Final Fantasy*?

Somewhat... the biggest difference is that we're not just using the franchise. The people who created *Kingdom Under Fire* are making *Circle of Doom* as well. We don't want to be seen in the same way as *Dirge of Cerberus*.

Incorporating a dream state is an interesting and original way to frame missions and evolve the characters. What can you tell us about the genesis of this system? By the way, is that Patrick Stewart I hear?

I've been told that due to contract policies with SAG, I'm not at liberty to reveal the names of voice actors; however, we're not that rich a company. Dreams. Well, we dream all the time. I just thought we would begin there. In truth, it's just such a burden to create a whole town, but we needed something that would play the role of a town. Actually, I was always frustrated that I had to visit towns every single time I needed to shop in a RPG.

"Actually, I was always frustrated that I had to visit towns every single time I needed to shop in a RPG."

~Henry Lee, video game director, Blueside

So goodbye strongholds and villages, interaction via shops, taverns, etc... I like it.

I know sitting down next to a fireplace in a tavern is really cool, but it's also frustrating having to visit a town every single time you need to buy something. So I replaced that with the dream world. Besides, this game focuses on multiplayer sessions, so I tried to come up with something where other players do not have to be dragged along with you for the sake of your quests/shopping. Plus, we just couldn't find the time to leisurely create castles and towns.

When you say the game focuses on multiplayer sessions, that's not to say that the single-player experience is lacking in any way right? I for one prefer a personal quest, not having to rely on or stay in pace with players online.

The game is designed with online sessions in mind but everything we do is also meant to deliver a rewarding single-player experience. That said when you play a co-





op mode, you don't need to wait or keep up with the other player's pace to solve a personal quest since you can access your quest by simply falling asleep via idol. While you are in dream, other players can move on without waiting for you.

The weapon synthesis is also interesting. How key is it to the game given the frequency new weapons are discovered?

There are about 50 or so Enhancements and these Enhancements can be combined to create new functions. Let's say you have a bow. If we add Guidance to it, arrows will home in on targets. Later on, if you add Piercing to the bow, the arrows will home in on targets, and pierce through them, then home in on the next target. Add Extortion to this formula and you'll receive more gold for killing a target.

Together with the SP cost and regeneration rate of various spells and special moves it seems like a lot went into the game's systems. It must have been a huge challenge to balance everything. Is that one of the toughest aspects of developing a game like this?

It depends. Of course, the QA team and the programming team have done insurmountable, hellish testing, but the users will definitely find ways to create even more horrifying strategies. So, instead of blocking out every possible "abuse," we decided to keep it in the lines of "let them play freely, but just check up on

the most serious worst-case scenarios."

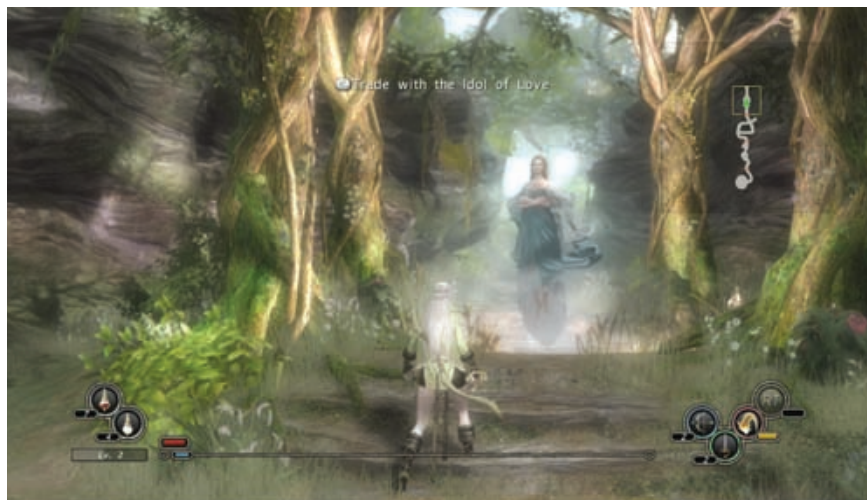
This might sound a bit irresponsible, but we believe this will be fun, and after we reached that state of thinking, balancing the game wasn't so gruesome.

Blueside has become known for its art direction and character design, especially among open world games featuring massive enemy swarms. Moving to the 360 hardware while scaling back the game's proportions, where have you concentrated all of the residual detail?

We put a lot of effort into environments that can be wholly destroyed, and to take advantage of this feature, we had to increase our workload for the background details, which led to more work on character details, which basically piled up as a mountain of work to be done. The behavior patterns of the enemies, while not much more superior to patterns that can be fully expanded in pure action games, are more varied this time compared to the hordes of troops we handled the last time. In short, in previous titles, order of the troops was our focus; this time, we designed everything with variety in mind.

Your use of normal mapping is evident yet subtle. Is this a design choice to make the game look more organic?

Organic, yes. Instead of striving for photo-





effects, even if it gave off a surreal mood. We proactively used normal mapping for metal-like monsters and Flesh Golems, but kept the overall balance in mind.

When I reached the first boss playing as Celine, I almost couldn't believe my eyes. Are there more like that monstrosity? It sure is nice to get back to good old massive boss fights.

Before, hack and slash action RPGs were about tiny characters and bosses just staring at each other, trading damage back and forth by showing numbers. I didn't like that, so I wanted to put in some bosses that made the game feel like an action game. The first boss is the largest, but he's the gentler sort. The bosses later on are hectic, so to speak. This does not mean you'll be throwing away your controller in frustration. We wanted to stress the importance and rewards of character growth, so the bosses are designed in a way that you need not worry too much about your lack of hand-eye action coordination skills.

The monsters in general are as daunting

and massive as ever. Who designs these behemoths and from where does he or she draw inspiration?

The basic monsters and bosses are born in the director's twisted mind. After that, our art director, along with other artists, fleshes out all those quirky and horrifying beasties. On top of that, the lead programmers and lead graphics people go through meetings to add in aspects that make them even more fun to fight with. For this title, the director had to come up with most of the basic ideas due to time constraints, but starting with the next title, the artist will be participating from early stages to give birth to more quirky monstrosities.

What about armor and costumes? Again Blueside excels in these areas. Same individual?

No. This time the work was a team effort done by other artists who were not responsible for the original KUF: The Crusaders artwork. Since many characters are those who have appeared in KUF: TC, their initial armor/costumes are similar in design to that game. But the

"I know sitting down next to a fireplace in a tavern is really cool, but it's also frustrating having to visit a town every single time you need to buy something."

—Henry Lee, video game director, Blueside

Good things, like new armor, come in small packages.

costumes change into something totally different as the game progresses. This has something to do with the setting.

It seems like Celine's footing is trying to match the terrain, although it doesn't seem implemented yet. Is this something you're shooting for or will her feet melt into steps and so forth?

For this title, our main focus was on balancing the game for 100+ hours of playing time, with background environment destruction, graphics and rendering that would still keep the players excited without massive hordes of troops. If we're lucky and get the chance to make an action game, I want to fully implement what you have just said.

In a 2-4 player co-op game over Xbox LIVE do you throw more enemies out when there are multiple players? What about boss battles: do all four characters participate?

Ah. Unfortunately, more enemies will not appear due to framerate limits. However, their HP and the EXP they give out will increase as more people join the game. The boss battles are just so much more fun in multiplayer. For example, two party members can fend off the boss while two others are busily rearranging their inventories for the tough fight, and looting the items while at it. The two front-line members will probably be angry as hell, I guess. If this seems too selfish, you can always clap and root for the fighters. Clapping can

raise the SP of your party members.

Are the characters closely balanced or does the single-player mode still work its way from easy to hard?

It's not a clear-cut easy-to-hard progression, but there are characters that are difficult to play at first, and then become powerful. Likewise, there are characters that are easy to handle but need more precise handling as time passes, and some that are not top-notch powerhouses but are enjoyable to play without too much thought. We tried to provide players with characters that can appeal to various tastes, but there are some who are a bit difficult or easy to play at first.

The music is extraordinary, the way it seems to coincide with the flow and mood of each region. You've always produced amazing soundtracks. Same person on this game as KUF and N3?

Nope. KUF: TC, KUF: Heroes, N3, and COD have music done by different studios. Back in KUF: TC, we got two basic responses: "Wow, it's metal!" and "Oh, it's metal...(sigh)." So this time, I really tried to use some general orchestral light music. Unfortunately, one day I

realized that our music was Industrial Rock in a slightly softer version.

The reptile hordes that attack in the forest: Are they from N3? I swear I've seen them somewhere before. Is this game closest to N3 in its lineage?

Oh, no. If they were, we would be in serious trouble with the big company that holds the "N3" stuff. N3 isn't our game, remember. But I think since the creators are the same, a bit of this and that tends to rub off a bit. N3 was targeted for the Japanese market, so we tried to let go of that attitude this time.

What is the overall crux of the story?

It's very ethereal in its presentation regarding lost souls and gathering fragments of shattered minds.

One interesting aspect of COD is that you absolutely do not have to take interest in the storyline if you don't want to. Of course, if you do follow the plot, there are some advantages. So this time, the story plot is like a chase through a wild jungle. That's not to say that the story



Lop off the head and the body dies... at least that's the plan.





The Ice Maiden will send chills down your spine.

and complex, so that those who want to follow it will have to think hard in deep retrospection. I'm sure that players who take interest in the plot of COD will want something more than cliché plotlines. The main two concepts of the plot in COD are Spirit and Will. Spirit contains one's memories and knowledge, while the Will contains the desires and goals of a person. If Will is the program, Spirit is the data. Even when a person dies, if his/her Spirit Crystal is intact the Will can survive through it. Thus, the Spirit Crystal is something like a person's keepsake or heirloom. The setting in COD is the Dimension of Encablossa, and in that place, the boundary between dream and reality is quite blurry. The dream shows the mental distance of reality as physical distance. For example, even if I'm walking in a crowd, if there is no one I know among them, I would be walking alone in my dream. But if there's a friendly face on the other side of the

globe thinking of me, that person will be right next to me in my dream. In this way, dreams and realities can affect each other.

What would be your personal message to the massive 360 audience looking for high adventure this season? Can you sum up what KUF has to offer for our readers?

I know all developers say this, but we did work very hard on this title. I play the Xbox 360 often and play LIVE games, but one thing that was lacking was the fact that there isn't enough network games (whether demos or Arcade games) that you can just relax and play. Most are PVP-based, and playability depends too much on the network status. COD was made with the concept of gleefully hacking at monsters with friends or strangers (the latter might be a bit dangerous), chatting and cackling in bloody laughter. The game looks serious and a bit grotesque, but that's just the candy wrapping to hide the quirky and humorous core of our game. It's serious yet totally not serious, and we strived to make your gaming experience something fun and enjoyable.

“The basic monsters and bosses are born in the director's twisted mind. After that, our art director, along with other artists, fleshes out all those quirky and horrifying beasties.”

~Henry Lee, video game director, Blueside

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PlayStation®2



Folklore

Video games are art

words Nick Des Barres

Game Republic's *Folklore* is an enigma. I'm going to tell it to you straight: It's a sensational game. I just don't think I'm equipped to parse exactly *how* sensational it is, and I may not be able to for several more years. Like many classics, it may require aging in the memory, like a fine wine, to truly understand. It's not that there's anything particularly revolutionary about it. To the contrary, you might call it antiquated: Just another Japanese action-adventure, evoking game grammar that goes right back to *The Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid*, and *Kid Icarus*. Nevertheless, something tells me—or rather, makes me *feel*—that I've just

played this generation's *Ico*.

As a critic who is expected to be relatively impartial, I know that many Western reviews will be unkind to *Folklore*, will complain about its archaic gameplay, perhaps talk about how Japan has fallen woefully behind in every conceivable area of video game design, what a pity. As a *gamer*, however, I can only tell you how I feel, and for me, this game is the generation's first true masterpiece: Recall that it was released in Japan two months prior to *BioShock*, and I experienced it thus.

I'm someone who grew up on Japanese games, knows their history and lore back-to-front. To say they drew me to live in the country would not be entirely inaccurate.



The soul-sucking system is *Folklore*'s only gameplay misstep: Various manipulations of the SIXAXIS are required to rip them out, and it can often be tedious.



“Evoking a sense of otherworldliness is, I am assuming, the reason Folklore exists, and it succeeds at this in an almost heartbreakingly beautiful way no other game ever has.”



I love them dearly; you might draw a comparison with an aging vinyl addict who commands an encyclopedic knowledge of 20th century pop, forever polishing his analog record collection, immune to the siren call of modern, artificial beats. Sadly, I can see myself becoming that guy. The most pessimistic of observers will tell you the Japanese game industry is imploding; in ten years a Japanese video game will be about as relevant as Japanese music or films are in the international market.

What a goddamn shame, when they make games like Folklore. Its gameplay is rock-solid—I'll get to that in a moment—but if I may selfishly reduce the game's bewitching charms to one word, the word would be “color”. Video games in 2007, driven by the Western markets, strive to be aggressively realistic. Do me a favor, and look around for a moment. Look at reality. It's grey. It's earth-toned. So are the games you're playing. Like cinema ceased its passionate love affair with the vivid hyperrealism of Technicolor during the 60s and 70s, gaming now seems to be heading

down a similar path. Artistic mores come and go, but *color* is the reason Folklore is so startling.

Perhaps Japan's gaming isolationism is good for one thing: The designers of the seven worlds that comprise Folklore *make love* to color. I've never seen the pinks and oranges of Folklore's faery realms in real life, nor do I ever expect to—and that's exactly why I'm playing video games, thanks. I don't want to walk down flawlessly-realized New York streets or tread across drab Bosnian battlefields, I want to go *somewhere else*. Evoking a sense of otherworldliness is, I am assuming, the reason Folklore exists, and it succeeds at this in an almost heartbreakingly beautiful way no other game ever has.

Folklore's design, though heavily informed by the European stereotype of “little people”, spirits and dwarves that hearkens back to the era of Doyle's Cottingley Fairies, is quite simply like nothing else I have ever seen. You might say Yoshiaki Okamoto's troupe of ex-Capcom developers is doing here



what the Japanese do best: Projecting foreign ideas and culture through their own idiosyncratic lens, producing a final result that is neither wholly Western nor Eastern, but somehow elevated above both. They may not be pushing quite as many polygons or working the SPUs as hard as a Western developer might, but the fact is that they are producing art in a way no American or European developer has yet proven to be capable of, and that is Folklore's greatest strength.

Of course, games aren't just about the pretty. Folklore's tried-and-true gameplay is impeccably tailored, but it's a suit we've all donned a hundred times before: Well-worn, perhaps slightly out of fashion, but still elegant. I can compare the game to

a blown-up, zoomed-in version of Koji Igarashi's two Castlevania games starring Soma Cruz, Aria and Dawn of Sorrow. You, as protagonists (and directly-opposing *antagonists* in the narrative) Ellen and Keats, travel through seven realms of the Netherworld connected to a central hub, the Irish town of Doolin. Ellen has come after receiving a letter from her long-dead mother; Keats has come because of a mysterious phone call he received from Ellen that she has no memory of placing. Through events I won't ruin here, the two are forced to come and go between the seven worlds, solving mysteries concerning mysterious deaths in the town, and other, deeper plot threads in the realms of the Faery that reach back to the beginning of



"The challenge is there, both cerebral and twitchy; something increasingly rare in Japanese games as they sink ever-deeper towards a Nintendo DS-driven lowest common denominator."

human civilization. On your roughly 20-to-30-hour adventure (there are many optional quests), you will defeat beings known as the Folks, collecting their souls as you go. Every single enemy has a soul to take, and each can be assigned to any of the SIXAXIS's four face buttons: They act as both enemy and armament. Unlike Soma, Ellen and Keats are normal people, unable to wield swords, whips or knives—you must attack with Folks, arranging and building them like a miniaturized deck in a strategy card game. Each Folk has an elemental attribute that must be pitted against enemies of the opposing type: There is no über-Folk that can be used against anything, and you must constantly rearrange your four-button deck to cope with the current situation.

Structurally, it's like a classical (read: pre-2000s) JRPG replete with elaborate elemental strategies and combos requiring a fair amount of tactical thinking, married to an action game of the type these developers helped invent in 2001 with Onimusha. The challenge is there, both cerebral and twitchy; something increasingly rare in Japanese games as they sink ever-deeper towards a Nintendo DS-driven lowest common denominator. With that said, don't expect the bastard child of Final Fantasy V and Ninja Gaiden. Folklore exists somewhere between those

two extremes: Strategic arrangement of your Folks helps to alleviate the monotony of hack-and-slash, and vice-versa.

If that sounds good to you, and if you're coming from a place similar to mine—Zelda, Ys, Actraiser, Symphony of the Night, Ico, I could go on—Folklore is for you. It's your game. Don't let it get lost amidst the Uncharteds and Halo 3s of the world; embrace it, let it into your life, be transported away to monster kindgoms and unknown realms. God knows, with the way the Japanese game industry seems to be headed, it may be your last chance.

Folklore		score
		9.0
+	Sumptuous visuals, rock-solid gameplay, a great story: In short, classic Japanese gaming	
-	SIXAXIS support is unnecessary	
System(s)	PS3	
Developer	Game Republic	
Publisher	Sony	
Online/Multi	N/A	
ESRB Rating	T	
Available	10/09	

Tomb Raider Anniversary

No hand-me-down

words Dave Halverson

Victorious Boxers: Revolution

Wii gets an anime-based boxing RPG

words Dave Halverson

anime fans know the story well, about Ippo, a timid highschooler rescued from a beating at the hands of a boxer, befriended by his defender and subsequently immersed into the world of boxing, emerging as a natural working his way through the ranks to a title shot. It's a heartfelt story that finds a great home on the Wii as the first boxing action/RPG, like a cross between Punch-Out and a 3D anime. The game's look takes some getting used to; Cavia use thick black lines

and limited poly count models to achieve an anime look, but the gameplay is great, and the overall production true to the story.

Victorious Boxers: Revolution

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Xseed Games
Publisher	Cavia
Available	Q4

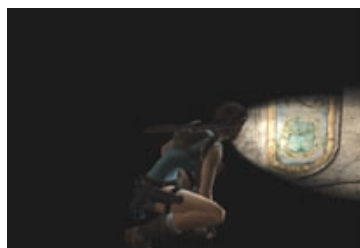


idos and Crystal Dynamics could have easily ported the code and rejiggered the controls adapting TRA for the Wii, but that's just not how they roll when it comes to their hot-as-ever commodity. TRA Wii is a new product, complete with new Wii-specific gameplay features like a new flashlight and real-time lever and puzzle control, and a graphics pass that takes full advantage of the Wii specs. The end result is no less than the best adventure game to hit the console since Twilight Princess.



Tomb Raider Anniversary

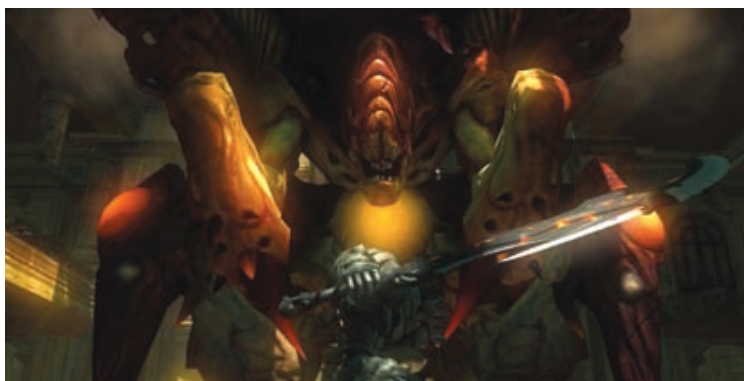
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Crystal Dynamics
Publisher	Eidos
Available	December



Darksiders: Wrath of War

See you on the dark side

words Dave Halverson



darksiders is what you get when you cross comic book artist extraordinaire Joe Madureira with War—one of the Four Horsemen of the apocalypse. Once the deed is done (helping to bring about the end of days) War finds himself engaged in a war between demons and angels—a scenario that has video game written all over it, in goat blood—only after a betrayal that's robbed him of his powers. Expect stunning art direction, a deeply

engaging tale of revenge and character design fit for the end of the world.

Darksiders: Wrath of War

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Vigil Games
Publisher	THQ
Available	Q1 2008





CC2's second game, a seminal cult-hit PlayStation sci-fi actioner, released in 1999.



The culprit of many long lunch hours

CyberConnect2

An Interview With Hiroshi Matsuyama, President and CEO, CyberConnect2 (.hack//GU)

Interview Dai Kohama
Translation Nick Des Barres

play: First of all, thank you for your time today. I'd like to begin by asking about the .hack project's genesis. How did it come about, and was GU something you envisioned happening from the beginning?

Hiroshi Matsuyama: Let's see...the first inklings of the project began before the PlayStation 2 was even released. We had our concept in 1999. After finishing our second PlayStation game, *Silent Bomber**, we studied the PS2 hardware for six months, which was still a complete unknown at the time. We'd always had a great relationship with Bandai, and they never really had a marquee RPG, did they?



We felt they had so many licensed character games, so we wanted to do this entirely new and unique project, .hack.

We were aiming for right around when the PS2 came out. The Dreamcast was released a little earlier but both consoles were supposed to have net connectivity. This was when online games like *Ultima Online* and *Diablo* were really getting big, and I was sure that just as games had shifted from 2D to 3D, this new online world, and connecting with other people, would bring about totally new kinds of gameplay.

That's what was very hot back then, but we were thinking of our target audience first. Our core fan is about 14-17 years old, middle school through high school. With people that age...let's say they have a console and a TV in their room. No matter how popular online games got, they'd be asked to not only buy a game, but sign up for an internet provider, pay by a credit card they didn't have...I knew this was not going to happen yet.

If we made an online game then, it would have only been played by university students, people in their 20s. We thought,

"Why not take what's fun about MMORPGs, and make a sort of 'pretend-MMORPG' younger people can play offline?" Online games are huge fun, right? I believe that communication is the greatest form of entertainment. There's that sense of anonymity in MMORPGs, something that lends itself to drama. "Let's make an offline game with the fun factor of an online game..." That was the birth of .hack.

As far as GU, the first volume of .hack eventually came out in May 2002, and we released the volumes every three months. This was late 2002...after we finished Vol.2 and were working on 3 and 4, we started the concepts for GU. I recently looked back at the very first GU documents, and they were dated October, 2002. That was when GU really began.

I see. Let me ask you then about Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, the famous character designer from *Nadia* and *Evangelion*, and about how he became involved in the project.

At the time, the current vice-president of Bandai Namco Games [ed. note-Namco Bandai Games in America], Shin Unozawa, had just become the top guy at Bandai's games division. He wanted to do something completely original, and obviously it had to succeed, it had to sell. He told me, "We'll back you 100%, you just do everything you can."

We can do character design ourselves—we certainly have—but this was Bandai's first major RPG. For the character design, and for the script as well, we needed people with clout. We discussed internally who we thought would be good...someone we could trust with the character design. Mr. Sadamoto was the answer. Of course, I'm also a huge fan of his myself [laughs].

When I told Mr. Unozawa we wanted Mr. Sadamoto, he said, "Okay. I'm sure you'll be turned down, but go talk to him." I basically just showed up at Gainax and asked, "Is Mr. Sadamoto in?" [laughs] We talked for a while, and...I got turned down. "I'm an animator," he said, "I don't know anything about games, and I don't understand them." All I could do was go home. We specifically talked about what he didn't like about games: Animation has its own style, and it's virtually impossible to reproduce in 3D.

He actually used the Japanese World War II fighter plane, the Zero, as an example.

The Zero?

It's a little hard to explain, but let's say you're drawing a Zero in an anime, from a side-angle. Physically, you wouldn't be able to see the wing on the far side, but if you *could* it would look really cool, so the animator draws it that way.

Ah, something only possible in 2D...

In 3D games, things that are hidden by a 3D object, you just don't see them, right? There's no other way to put it. Mr. Sadamoto simply didn't feel the artistic value of that. In animation, if you're drawing a face from the front, you draw it to look best that way. If you draw it in three-quarters, you draw it specifically for that angle. He felt that with 3D models, even if you had a good one that could be viewed from all angles, no angle would be *the* angle, the perfect angle.

Basically we talked about the limitations of 3D. "Even if I design you characters, I won't know how they'll be displayed, so I can't do that kind of job, I don't *want* to do that kind of job." So I went back home to Hakata with the idea of showing him exactly what we could do, and in about a month we did a sample 3D model for him.

It was Rei Ayanami from Evangelion, running on PS2. I brought it to Gainax and told him, "I remember you said you couldn't imagine what your characters would look like in 3D, so I brought something for you to see!" His response was, "I already told you no, why are you here?" [laughs] But I did get

him to watch the demo. I thought we'd done it. I was *sure* this would be it, but he's a serious creator, very specific. He said, "Just look," and pointed out all sorts of flaws. This is wrong, that's wrong, these are the limits of 3D, and so on. "See? I told you it was impossible," he said, and back to Hakata I went [laughs].

We worked for about another month on the Rei model, fixing the parts he didn't think looked right, and I showed him that. We went back and forth for about six months, and at the end we had a *perfect* Rei Ayanami running on PS2, let me tell you! Of course it's not something anyone will ever see [laughs]. Over those six months, I think Mr. Sadamoto changed a little. He began to see the possibilities of 3D, and I think he saw that we here at CyberConnect2 were very serious and passionate. He knew that as an animator he couldn't work on the game directly, but would be able to give us hints and advice and we would absolutely take them to heart. Finally, we agreed to work together.

Six months! That must have been very difficult. Your dedication is incredible.

This is, of course, way before the first .hack. Now we've been working together for years, very amicably.

Haseo all the way down the rabbit hole.



"it's common knowledge that no matter how great your game is, no matter how strong of a foundation it has...that doesn't guarantee sales."

Hiroshi Matsuyama, president and CEO

Moving on, the .hack universe is a gigantic one. It spans games, anime, novels, manga...is it difficult to keep track of all that? How do you decide which part of the story works with what type of media, and how do you keep track of the continuity?

Of course, Bandai Namco had a lot of ideas about what media we were going to be expanding into with .hack. It was part of the .hack concept, but speaking with Mr. Unozawa...look, back then, wouldn't you have been suspicious of an original Bandai RPG? There's no way it would sell, people would just be too wary of it. I mean, it's common knowledge that no matter how great your game is, no matter how strong of a foundation it has...that doesn't guarantee sales.

So, with Bandai making an original game...like, if another third party made it, it would just be a game. Mr. Unozawa wanted to do something that played to Bandai's strengths. He wanted a project that was Bandai-esque, as a company. If we didn't do that, there'd be no point in doing it at all.

The difference with Bandai is that they've always made toys. They have factories, they can produce a wide variety of products. Making use of that potential, not doing just a game, but having simultaneous expansion of this brand across many types of media—that's something only Bandai could do.

So, from the very start we were thinking about, like, capsule toys. Toys, cards and lots of other stuff came out. Bandai's a giant company, they can do virtually anything...anime, comics, it was natural. We partnered with many other companies, too; the anime was done by this studio, the comic by that publisher. Exactly when the manga would start its run, timing the books to come out right before the games and so on, the approach, and all the ideas for that, came from Bandai Namco.

Now, as far as the actual content...what do you base the anime on? The manga? They could have all been the same story, but that's boring. That would be pointless. There's also the problem of management. Animators, game creators, mangaka, they all think differently, their skills are totally different, right?

Because of that, we were allowed to take control of everything ourselves. For example the anime would show what happened six months before the game, the game story would end, and the manga that came out after that would continue the story four years later. We created the entire storyline and participated completely in the meetings with the various mangaka and animation companies. Because we did it ourselves, the work known as .hack is all connected and coherent.



Everything about .hack is very episodic in that way, even the games themselves. Serial RPGs are very rare. How do you pace a story that way? I was so desperate to know what happened after all the endgame cliffhangers I basically started playing each volume the day it came out and didn't stop until I beat it. Really?! Thank you very much.

No, that's just how great the pacing of the story was. How do you keep the player so interested over three very long installments?

Well, the first thing on our minds with these games is "how do we keep the tension up, how do we sustain this?" [laughs] However, the qualities of the original .hack and GU are very different. The inspiration we were using with the original four volumes of .hack was that each was an original anime. As an example, let's say one summer there's an original movie playing—not a sequel—as well as the sixth Star Wars. If you've never seen the others in the series, which movie are you going to go see? For us, the thing with the first .hack was to always keep it new and fresh, something that could be anyone's first RPG.

However, with GU, and this was something decided on from the very

beginning...I'm a manga freak, and my idea for .hack was "this is a shonen [boy's] manga." Good shonen manga are exciting every single week, right? Every week you want to read it, see what comes next. I mean we wanted every single hour of the game to be like a weekly installment of a shonen manga. Since we did GU with that as the major theme, we wanted the player to almost not know when to save and call it a day. I think the story has a very strong motivation from beginning to end.

I never knew when to stop playing myself. Since you compared the two .hacks, I'd like to ask if you faced any new difficulties you didn't expect with GU?

This is true every time, but the release schedule is incredibly tough. We may have had the concept for GU in 2002, but it started development in 2003. We spend a year on the story and the design, and let's say hard development takes two and a half years total...but in that last year, the volumes actually start to get released. GU was three volumes so we released them every four months, and what that means, although this is obvious, is that you have to produce a gold master every four months.

It was really no different from .hack, actually. For the first two years, we're building the engine and system for all three volumes, but when we've got our foundation and it gets right down to it, we've got to make a game in *four months*. We crunch so hard for those four months, and finally, "all right, it's gold!!"...and then the next second, "two more to go..." [laughs].

The hardest part was how up against the wall all our staff were. When Vol.3 went gold, it was...how should I put it? A feeling of emptiness you'd never get on any other project [laughs]. It was so tough I let everyone have a full month off, we did *nothing*. I didn't get any time off, though [laughs]!

Like you said earlier, .hack really feels like a living, breathing MMORPG, with all the messages and BBSes and so on. How did you simulate that? What did you use for reference?

In development, we considered the game everyone plays in the world of .hack, The World, to be an actual game. As research we looked at what was unfair about MMORPGs, as well as what parts of specific MMORPGs that people really liked. We studied what MMORPG messageboards were like and had the staff play a lot of them. We were always very attuned to what players liked, and hated, about MMORPGs, so I think that The World rings true and really

makes .hack .hack.

Something very MMORPG is the concept of grinding, long and tedious battles and dungeons, and that was something that a lot of critics complained about in .hack.

That's true. When you build a complicated game system, it's a crime not to make full use of it. That's one thing. Also, in MMORPGs, even if you're just battling, it's kind of emotional, isn't it? Since MMORPGs are really the .hack motif...in MMORPGs you do a heck of a lot of fighting. It's not necessarily that the fighting itself is fun, but rather the emotional aspect of going to a dungeon specifically to help another person to get something, or to meet another person.

That's very true.

Because that's so very MMORPG, although there are missions you have to beat to advance the story or quests you go on, we tried hard to tie them to the communicative aspect between the characters. The kind of structure .hack has is intentional.

So the intention with the grinding was to faithfully reproduce the MMORPG experience.

Yes, but believe me, the players were vocal about it: "Not ANOTHER fetch quest!"

Now I hope you'll let me move on to a fanboy question. This is actually something that was talked about a lot on the net...

Oh, what is it?!

The cliffhanger at the end of Vol.2 That was harsh. A lot of people I know thought it was really frightening. How did you decide on such a bold way to end the volume?

Uh...first I want to say thank you [laughs]. That's exactly how we wanted the player to feel. Leaving aside the ongoing drama of the story, we decided exactly where to begin and end all three volumes early on. What's interesting is that they weren't decided in order. The very first thing we knew was how we were going to end Vol.2. That was set in *stone*.

The intention with that was to betray the player's expectations by revealing the answer to the biggest mystery in the story in Vol.2, not drag it out into 3 as most people would expect. To really draw the player in. To be honest, there were vocal factions in our company saying, "What?! Do you *really* want to end it this way?!" [laughs] But it was something I was very particular about and followed it through to the end. I even



directed the performances for that scene myself. Haseo and Atoli are looking at each other and...

Let me stop you there, just in case our readers haven't finished Vol.2 yet (laughs).

Okay [laughs]. With that scene, our visual team didn't get what I wanted the first time. I assembled them in our meeting room and made them get a camera and I said, "Look, I'll perform it for you, watch this!"

They were going to use what we did as the basis for the motions, and a couple staffers...both men, but hey...were Haseo and Atoli. I played the part of Ovan, and the moment Atoli turned around I was very specific, "*Here I am!*" I just had to show them *exactly* how it had to be [laughs]. You may not have noticed, but at that moment the controller rumbles for just a split-second. I put that in later.

I did notice, actually.

I'm honestly not a fan of controllers just suddenly vibrating. You're playing, and it goes "vrrr!", and I just get irritated. We don't use rumble a lot for that reason, but I felt it was important there.

Something unfortunate for Western .hack fans is how the exquisite timing of the anime and game releases just didn't coincide in America. For instance, the anime stopped airing at episode 21, and the DVDs are still only on volume 3. The last episode in particular was pivotal, as it introduced a character who later appeared in the games. If you hadn't seen the anime, you'd have no idea who it was. Did some wires get crossed with that, or...?

It's difficult. I mean...if you asked me if you *had* to watch the anime to fully enjoy the games, I'd say no...

I agree, but still...

Luckily with .hack, each iteration is somewhat self-contained, so you really can enjoy them in any order. I think you can

definitely go back and enjoy the complete anime when it's all released, because the span of time it covers is totally different from the game, right? Even in Japan there are players who will watch the anime after finishing the games, getting insight on the various unsolved mysteries...although it is true that it was a complete story designed to link chronologically.

While on this track, let me ask you about the special anime DVD that takes place after the game, which players in Japan could receive if they bought all three volumes of .hack//GU. Will it be released in America in any form?

Well...if you come to Japan there's this place called Akihabara [laughs]... No, I'm kidding. With regards to the post-ending anime DVD, there's a lovely company in San Jose called Namco Bandai Games, call them, send them letters! I know they'll make the fans' dreams come true! [ed.note—the plans for releasing the special anime DVD in America are not finalized, and it is entirely possible it may be released in America in some form.]

CyberConnect2 makes a lot of games, but something about .hack feels special, different. What does it mean to you, Mr. Matsuyama?

We do make a lot of games, the fighting games and such...but with .hack...how should I put it? With this series I feel like it's a giant festival. When we first came up with the idea, while we were making it, while it was being released...it was a project that was just so much fun I almost couldn't



"The intention with that was to betray the player's expectations by revealing the answer to the biggest mystery in the story in Vol.2, not drag it out into 3 as most people would expect."

“ Even in Japan there are players who will watch the anime after finishing the games, getting insight on the various unsolved mysteries”



Tail Concerto, CC2's debut work released in 1998, is also considered a forgotten classic.

stand it.

We're a developer, so our job begins with development and ends when the game is done. Then it goes to Bandai Namco, who promote and sell it, and it leaves our hands. However, in the case of .hack, it's not only the reactions from the players but also the continuing media expansion that really excites us, almost allowing us to enjoy it from the perspective of the fan. That's what I mean when I say it feels like a big festival.

Do you think you want to continue down the path of serial games, with lots of supporting media?

Hmm...to be perfectly honest, there are aspects of it I'm getting tired of [laughs]. No, perhaps "getting tired" isn't the right term. The reason each .hack is entirely set inside The World is not just because that's what .hack is, it's also a challenge we're giving ourselves. It's not a case of, "well, the last one sold, let's do the same thing again." That's not interesting to me.

"We've done that already, now let's do this!" is more in line with what I want to do, and as far as serial games...we established

the ongoing story thing with the original .hack, right? That series came with DVDs, and on GU we purposely didn't include them. For this one we wanted to tell the story in just three tight games, but with a full-on shonen manga feel, like, "You're ending it here?! I can't believe you're making me wait four more months!" The point was leave the player in that state of agony [laughs].

Now we've done that style of serial storytelling, and I'm satisfied with how it worked in GU. If we ever do another serial game, we'll surprise you, we'll do something totally different.

We're looking forward to it...and speaking of looking forward to your games, you recently announced a DS and a PS3 project. The concept art looks very Tail Concerto

Bandai Namco Games Liaison: We can't talk about that!

Shot down (laughs)! Fair enough. While we're kind of on the topic of your past works, your cult-hit PlayStation game, Silent Bomber, was just released as a PSN downloadable...

Yes! I'm really thankful.

We at Play personally love that game to pieces, is there any chance you'll ever revisit that world, as you've joked about on your website?

The PlayStation Archives on PSN can be played on PS3 or PSP, which is great...let's say it sold incredibly, incredibly well as a download, sure, there could be a sequel.

Excellent! Let's hope it does. And what might be next for the Narut--

Oh, that is so no comment! No comment [laughs]!



Okay. Now, this is sort of a vague question, but a friend of mine who works at another game company in Kyushu [ed.note-southern Japan, where CC2 is located] always says: "When it comes to game companies in Kyushu, as far as tech, as far as company culture, there's no beating CC2..."

Oh, come on, nobody says that [laughs].

They really do. In the Kyushu game industry CC2 is almost revered. What I want to ask is, what do you think makes CC2 so special, so unique?

We want to run a company that's like no other. For example, our licensed games. You could have another company do them, but it wouldn't be the game we'd make. What we will never do is develop a title another company could do just as well.

This is not just true of Bandai Namco, but many publishers come to us to develop games for them. If it's something we feel is like, "there's no reason another developer couldn't do this", we turn the offer down. Honestly, it's part of the reason we've been working with Bandai Namco for eleven years now.

This is a bit of an odd question, but furry fans, fans of cartoon animal characters, sort of worship CC2. It's even in your Wikipedia entry. What's up with your company and the furry thing?

We have a lot...a lot of furries here! Our two main guys in that fandom are called Waka and Inumaru. These two...I mean, not just these two, but especially these two...yeah, furries. Big furry fans.

Obviously that comes from Tail Concerto and the many anthropomorphic characters in .hack, but CC2 has also recently designed an elaborate setting and a character called Mamoru-kun*3, set in the same world as Tail Concerto. Will that ever be a game? This is my oblique attempt at getting you to talk about the next Tail Concerto (laughs).

Mamoru-kun is in our Little Tail Bronx world, but that was something we just did for the Fukuoka fire department, so... [ed.note-in



Mamoru-kun, a character from the Tail Concerto world designed for the Fukuoka Fire Department as a mascot. Mamoru-kun ©CyberConnect2 Co., Ltd.

Kyushu]

Our time is up, but this has been a fantastic interview. Any final words for American CyberConnect2 fans?

By the time your readers see this, .hack//GU Vol.3 will be coming out any day. If you played Vol.1, I hope you waited eagerly for 2 and played that as well, and now you're probably in that waiting period again. The wait—that tension—is very important to .hack! Like I said before, it's the anticipation of a great shonen manga, you just can't wait to see the next episode. Of course, once all three volumes are out you could play them in order, too, although it would be a different experience.

It's not too late! Please run out to a game store...GameStop/EB would be good [laughs]...and if you haven't already, pick up Vol.1 and 2, then relish the anticipation before you play Vol.3!

Thank you very much, Mr. Matsuyama.



Retro Gaming

Game designers talk the classics

Today's developers chime in on yesterday's gold

downloadable content has brought back the classics. To claim an old-school revival may be going a bit far, but there's no denying the importance of remembering the favorite games that got us here in the first place.

After a recent trip down memory lane with *Kid Icarus*, which, for whatever reason, had an unusual impact, I started striking up conversations with several developers about the classics. A few were kind enough to take a break and talk their favorites...

Amy Hennig

Creative Director, Naughty Dog
Current Project: *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*

I think the game that had the biggest impact on me was *Adventure for the Atari 2600*. I was probably about 14 when it came out, and I remember being just blown away by it. This was the first game I'd played where I felt totally immersed in the experience. It was so much more than just an exercise in aiming and reflexes—I enjoyed other games, but none of them grabbed hold of my imagination the way *Adventure* did.

It's still amazing to me how sliding a little square around a maze, dragging an arrow for a sword while fighting blocky dragons that look more like ducks, could create so much tension and suspense. But to this day, I swear I've never encountered anything in a game as scary as that red dragon.

Despite the primitive graphics, the gameplay was so well-conceived that it laid a foundation for the whole genre of adventure games to follow, and established many of the conventions and design principles that we still use today. Exploring and navigating dangerous environments; searching for keys, weapons and other useful items to solve problems and conquer obstacles; being chased by terrible monsters, or arming yourself to fight them—all in the quest to find a fabulous treasure. It sounds prosaic now, but it was groundbreaking stuff at the time.



“Defender was incredible: vibrant color, trademark Williams pinball sound effects, and what seemed like a entire world to explore at high speed.”

“But to this day, I swear I’ve never encountered anything in a game as scary as that red dragon.”



Mark Cerny

President, Cerny Games
Current Project (consulting): *Ratchet & Clank Future* (and others...)

I fell in love with *Defender* the first time I saw it. Back in 1981, everything was a bit different than it is today... you never knew what was coming, just some day suddenly there would be a brand new game in the arcade and a line of people waiting to play it.

Defender was incredible: vibrant color, trademark Williams pinball sound effects, and what seemed like a entire world to explore at high speed. Best of all, it wasn't just about quick reflexes, it was strategic—you needed to make a plan about how to defeat each enemy and then execute it.

I had my own little strategy for dealing with the protecting the humans. In case you don't remember, there are ten of them and when the last one is destroyed, the planet blows up and the game gets ten times harder. I'd kill nine of them myself—always good for shocking anyone watching me play—then hover over the last and wait for a *Lander* to pick it up. Then I'd take the *Lander* out (surgical strike required!) and catch the final human before he could hit the ground and die. Tricky to do, certainly, but if everything went to plan then I could play the rest of the level at pretty much my own pace.

Defender even got me my first job—a reporter interviewed me for the *Defender* section of an arcade game strategy book he was writing, and later he was kind enough to get me an interview at the coin-operated branch of Atari Games. And the rest, as they say, is history...



Donald Mustard

Creative Director, Chair Entertainment Group
Current Project: Undertow



One of my favorite games of all time is Super Metroid for the Super Nintendo. This was one of the first times I can remember a game actually making me feel “immersed”—in the world, in the story, in the character. There is much for the modern game designer to learn and emulate from Super Metroid. This game provides an almost perfect textbook example of pacing and game flow for any action-adventure game be it Halo or God of War. In my opinion, there are many reasons Super Metroid is amazing but the things that really resonate the most with me have got to be: The first ten minutes of the game, the open world design, and the gameplay evolution of Samus over the course of the game. The first ten minutes: The game opens with a short cinematic where you see Samus delivering the last surviving Metroid (that was captured at the end of The Return of Samus for the Game Boy) to a group of federation scientists on a remote space station. As soon as Samus leaves the Station it is attacked by an unknown assailant. Samus rushes back to the space station, and the game begins. As you make your way through the station it is quiet—too quiet. You soon come across a room with dead scientists everywhere and the container that held the last Metroid shattered. You continue to explore the eerie space station when you suddenly come across a massive alien space pirate. After an awesome boss fight the Pirate escapes with the Metroid and initiates the space station’s self-destruct sequence. You race back through the station and escape just in time. The space station explodes dramatically as Samus’s ship rockets away. This awesome intro does a great job of establishing the mood and underlying tension of the rest of the game.

Open world design: The world design in Metroid is brilliant. The game literally plops you down on the surface of planet Zebes and allows you to do whatever you want—or more appropriately, whatever you can. Through amazing design and by expecting the player to explore everything, the game world begins to unfold like an onion. This is a game where you will traverse every inch of the game world multiple times, but its brilliant because every time you do the world has changed in some way or you have acquired some new ability that allows you to do new cool things.

Gameplay evolution of Samus: At the start of the game Samus can jump and shoot. By the end of the game Samus has transformed into a speeding, flipping, engine of destruction. In the beginning you are limited by the obstructions of the world around you, by the end you are the master of the world. This concept of player evolution is not new to games, but few do it better or make you feel more accomplished and powerful than Metroid. These elements coupled with Super Metroid’s epic boss fights, 2D sprite graphics, and moody, cinematic music, are what secures this game on my list of top five games of all time.

“Flags and deathmatching are the black and white dots of the new millennium.”

“The world design in Metroid is brilliant. The game literally plops you down on the surface of planet Zebes and allows you to do whatever you want.”

Paul “Locki” Wedgwood

Owner/Lead Game Designer, Splash Damage Ltd.
Current project: Enemy Territory: QUAKE Wars

Back in the '80s I hated the descriptions on game boxes—I’d spend hours trying to decide how best to spend my £2.99, knowing games rarely delivered on their promise. “Pilot a spaceship and save planets!” the box blurb would claim, but should really have said “Pilot a white dot on a black background with vertical control!” Another read, “Ski down mountains in the Winter Olympics!” but if honest should have read, “We’ve inverted the background, and given you horizontal control. Yes! Now it’s a black dot on a white background!” Sure, graphics and artificial intelligence improved, but the immersion was never quite there for me. I wasn’t shocked, excited, depressed, or thrilled enough. I just wasn’t there.

Then BANG! Quake arrived in the '90s, and with it the birth of multiplayer online combat. Suddenly there were unpredictable human opponents. Trying to take my flag! Players to duel against, players who practiced tactics. My Clan needed to defeat teams who rehearsed their strategies. Tournaments, mod-making, online communities, forums to flame in, Internet-Relay-Chat to argue with enemies in: my gaming world exploded. I needed the best hardware; the widest bandwidth, the lowest latency. If I was going to get the required “skillz” I needed to spend less time at work and far less time sleeping. When daylight broke, and everyone I knew online had logged off to sleep, I’d venture outside, take a stroll down to the local shops, and watch closely as absolutely no one noticed me. Nobody knew my secret. I was one of the UK’s best “Ramp-Room” defense guys, while all those people passing me on the way to work (the ones that—unlike me—weren’t about to get fired for absence), they were newbies—they didn’t even deserve to know about multiplayer combat. I was l33t!

Now we know better. The sports and arena style play of '90s multiplayer combat—capturing flags and death-matching—was great fun but not enough to hold the attention of a new generation. Flags and deathmatching are the black and white dots of the new millennium. With Enemy Territory: Quake Wars we’ve worked hard with id Software to evolve that. New graphics, physics and networking technology have all helped, as has the gameplay asymmetry of a conventional military force against an advanced alien race, but in the end it’s ETQW’s team-play that truly immerses you – that sense of coordinating efforts with fellow humans, and the reward of being the hero.

The ripples of that first Quake permeate everything that is “online combat” today. It defined the shooter genre, it defined the notion of an online community, and created a new model for game development where developers like Splash Damage could be born from mod-making.



play Staff "Round-up"



Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, sandbox
Now playing: Eye of Judgment, Ratchet & Clank Future: ToD, Naruto Rise of a Ninja, Heavenly Sword, BioShock
Favorite Heroines: Lara Croft, Nariko (Heavenly Sword), Kameo

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.



Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: BioShock, FF Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates
Favorite Heroines: Nei, Azel, Chun-Li

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Stranglehold
Soul Nomad
Metroid Prime 3 Corruption
Looney Tunes Acme Arsenal
BioShock
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core
FlatOut
Fatal Inertia
Mercury Meltdown



Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: Mario Strikers Charged, BioShock, Pac-Man: CE
Favorite Heroines: Samus, Lara Croft, Claire Redfield

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Taoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.



Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, hummingbird simulators
Now playing: BioShock, Metroid Prime 3
Favorite Heroines: Alis Landale, Samus, Heather

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Two Worlds
Mario Strikers
Castlevania Dracula X Chronicles
Hot Pixl
Disgaea Afternoon of Darkness
The Legend of Zelda Phantom
Hourglass
Sonic Adventure Rush



Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Thrillville: Off the Rails, Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga
Favorite Heroines: Bastila Shan, Ms. Pac-Man, Claire Redfield

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...



Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Touch Detective 2.5, BioShock
Favorite Heroines: Alis Landale, Jill Valentine, Lammy

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Reviews

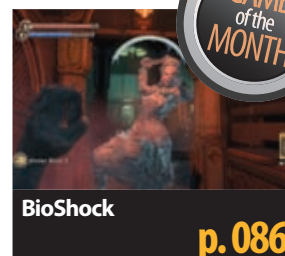
October 2007



Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: BioShock, Hellgate: London
Favorite Heroines: Alyx Vance, Samus, Blaze Fielding

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

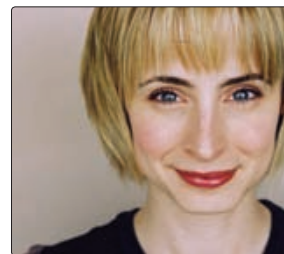


BioShock

p. 086

The play rating system

- 10...Perfect
- 9...Extraordinary
- 8...Great
- 7...Good
- 6...Decent
- 5...Average
- 4...Below average
- 3...Poor
- 2...Bad
- 1...Terrible



Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Stranglehold, BioShock
Favorite Heroines: Lara Croft, Rinoa, Mii (Wii)

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.



Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Space Giraffe, Warhawk, Metroid Prime 3
Favorite Heroines: Samus Aran

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.



Stranglehold

The power of Woo

words Heather Campbell

this is such a difficult review to write. Stranglehold is in many ways a personal dream game. As an obsessive fan of Hard Boiled, the idea of an interactive sequel to the film is froth-inducing. Add to that the introduction of Chicago to the John Woo universe (the Windy City being Midway's home town and also the place where I grew up), toss in the retention of Chow Yun-Fat as Tequila, and it's almost like the game was made specifically for me. Now, I would never be so arrogant as to claim a video-game, nor am I such a desperate fangirl to take it on as a part of my identity. But I'll be honest – I don't think I could imagine a game that was more tailored to my personal tastes.

I can see that Stranglehold has flaws. The levels are occasionally confusing, and the camera (adjustable though it may be) lends itself to nausea. Bosses aren't very inventive, enemies are faceless and repetitive ... the game feels retro, like

a Final Fight made for gunplay. Not to mention the slightly silly way Tequila slides across everything, like his pants are made of buttered satin. All that being said, I can't wait to pick up the game again. Diving across hallways, accompanied by the thunder of slow-motion, as you're unloading twenty rounds into a guy (who doesn't need to get hit more than once) is my idea of a good time. The special moves are cinematic, active events, and the sound design is John Woo signature stuff: silence before a symphony of explosions.

Stranglehold is Fun. It's fun in a God Hand way. (Don't let the industry scores for that game deceive you; God Hand as charming as a five pound burger at a kids table). Hard-core gamers who have been seduced by unnecessary options and ridiculous combos will brush past this sequel with elitist disdain. They'll discredit it as a Max Payne rip-off. Guys, Max Payne was an ugly game based on John Woo movies! This is clearly a



What's wrong with this picture?

"This is clearly a work of passion for the Midway team."

work of passion for the Midway team. Stranglehold has a voice, and should be celebrated for it.

Now, due to the unfortunate limitations of Review Code play (and the unavailability of multiple Debug Xbox units), I can't comment on the Multiplayer. I have no idea if it works, because I've only had access to the solo-player campaign. You can bet I'll be on Live by the end of the month, though. This will be the game I play on my first day off.

The PS3 version is the reason I'm getting a PS3. Hard Boiled comes on Blu-Ray with it.

The score I'm issuing is for the game I've played, and may be lowered or raised based on the viscosity of Live games. To be honest, I wish I could give the game a 10 – that's what it means to me. But I know that not everyone is deeply, romantically in love with classic John Woo films. We haven't all dreamt

about becoming the Hot Handed God of Cops – as I literally have – and so for those less biased than me, I rate the game accordingly.



Stranglehold

score **9.0**

- + It's mad, destructive, crunchy fun.
- Endless cloned enemies, cluttered level design, unimaginative bosses.

System(s)	360/PS3
Developer	Midway
Publisher	Midway
Online/Multi	1-6
ESRB Rating	Mature
Available	September

Soul Nomad & the World Eaters

Suikoden meets Yggdra Union meets... Extreme Makeover: Home Edition?

words Casey Loe

One thing I've always admired about Nippon Ichi is the way they seem to make games in a bubble, completely ignoring genre trends. While nearly every other developer of turn-based strategy games seems unable or unwilling to deviate from the Tactics Ogre/Final Fantasy Tactics formula, NIS keeps churning out original strategy epics that don't owe anything to anyone. Soul Nomad may not be a great game, but like Disgaea, it's a breath of fresh air in one of the industry's stalest genres.

Your army in Soul Nomad is composed of both preset characters who join you in event scenes, and purchased characters that are available in a wide and interesting variety of classes. You have space for over a hundred heroes, which you can organize into parties that act as a single unit on the battlefield. In combat, the moves used by each character vary based on its position in the party formation—a cleric will attack if placed in the front row, and cast healing spells if placed in the middle or back rows, for example. If you combine the right characters in the right positions, you can also unlock party abilities and powerful combo attacks. The genius of Soul Nomad's battle system is that it allows you to effectively battle with armies of 50+ characters, each of whom has a distinct role and personality, while only having to move a handful of icons on the battlefield. This would be the perfect battle system for the Suikoden series, and it's too bad that team didn't think of it first, because they'd

have made a much better game out of it.

While Soul Nomad has a great battle system, it doesn't have much else to brag about. Its quest is completely linear, with no RPG elements outside of the tedious dialogue scenes between battles (much of which you can skip, thankfully). And while the battle system is great, the battles themselves are often poorly designed. Virtually all of the game's 50 battles have a simple "kill all enemies" objective, and the enemy armies are often composed of only a single enemy class. There are certainly exceptions—the World Eater boss battles are quite fun, as are some of the game's later battles, but Soul Nomad is full of long stretches in which all you'll do is run at your nearest foe and start swinging.

The graphics in Soul Nomad are mixed, with great-looking characters fighting on hideous battlefield maps or conversing in bare-bones event scenes that make Metal Gear's Codec sequences look like a visual tour de force. The interface is a mess, in



Soul Nomad & The World Eaters

Score **6.5**

- + Great battle system
- Tedious story, poorly designed battles

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Nippon Ichi
Publisher	NIS America
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	T
Available	September 25

large part because the developers insisted on re-conceptualizing every traditional strategy-game concept. For example, you don't really recruit characters, form parties and equip items; you Restock Manakins, Design them into Rooms, and set up Décor. I've never seen developers work so hard to transform simple concepts into confusing ones.

Strategy fans who are hungry for a change of pace will appreciate Soul Nomad's many innovations, but be forewarned—they come wrapped in a pretty lousy game.

"Soul Nomad may not be a great game, but like Disgaea, it's a breath of fresh air in one of the industry's stalest genres."

Metroid Prime 3 Corruption

Proving once again that Prime *does* pay.

words Casey Lee

I'm not exactly sure why the release of Metroid Prime 3: Corruption didn't get to be the big deal it deserved to. Was it the deafening buzz over Bioshock? The excessively subtle marketing by Nintendo? The withholding of preview and review copies from print magazines, leaving them unable to cover it until a month after its release? (*COUGH*) Or maybe Metroid Prime has simply lost its visual sizzle—it is a little depressing to see a series that once stood at the cutting-edge of technology fall so far behind its next-gen rivals. Corruption is by no means a bad-looking game; it has several subtle improvements over its predecessors and is arguably the most attractive Wii title yet, but its low-res textures and simpler environments are unlikely to impress gamers who have been spoiled by the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. But that may

not be such a bad thing—if Retro had had the luxury of wowing us with next-gen visuals, they might not have put so much effort into refining the game itself.

I've praised the game's controls in past articles, and the final version has only strengthened my opinion that Corruption's Wiimote-pointer shooting is a near-perfect scheme for first-person games. But any concerns that the quality of the gunplay would lead to a more action-focused game can be laid to rest; while combat has seen the most dramatic improvement, exploration and puzzle-solving continue to split the focus three ways, and those elements are at least as satisfying as they've ever been. The star of the series remains its ingenious level design, both the artistry of crafting thoroughly believable alien worlds and the game design chops of cooking up something different and interesting to do in

each of a thousand different rooms. When exploring the several varied planets that compose Corruption's universe, everything feels unusually tight and refined. The puzzles aren't necessarily easier, but it's harder to get stuck—you'll rarely miss the solution because you overlooked a panel in the shadows or a tiny hole in the wall. The boss fights are longer and more complicated, yet rarely frustrating—nearly every duel is a satisfying, finely-tuned experience that ranks among the series' best. There's still plenty of backtracking in Corruption, but it always feels like a welcome opportunity to revisit old mysteries, and not a chore forced upon you by a developer trying to pad out the quest. When I was first told that "extra polishing" was the reason for the game's nine-month delay, I assumed it was bullshit. Now I actually sort of believe it.

Outside of the control scheme, there isn't much that's revolutionary about Metroid Prime 3. Samus's Phazon-venting Hypermode is a fun mechanic, and there are a handful of interesting new abilities, but it's clear that the point was not to lead the series in a new direction.

Instead, the developers have wrapped up the Metroid Prime trilogy by taking everything that past installments did well and doing it ever-so-slightly better. There aren't a lot of series that could produce such a satisfying finale out of such minor enhancements, but that's the ultimate testament to the skill of the studio and the strength of the Metroid Prime formula.

Metroid Prime 3 Corruption

score **9.0**

- +** Great Wiimote controls; polished, well-paced quest
- More of a minor evolution than a leap forward

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Retro Studios
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	None
Available	Now
ESRB Rating	Teen



Art direction
trumps
technology.





The Looney bin is open for business

words Dave Halverson

you wouldn't judge a book by its cover (would you?), so don't judge Warner Bros.' cartoon caper by its first act; just rush through like the rest of us and then settle in. Things start out a bit wobbly for Red Tribe's *Acme Arsenal* but before you know it you're waist deep in the best Looney Tunes adventure this side of Tazmania. Only an Ingnoranimous would judge it based on anything less than the whole tasty enchilada. Like those 16-bit games of old *Acme Arsenal* evolves, getting better with each passing level, building to a splendiferous climax. Aside from a few hiccups this is a thoroughly satisfying outing, cleverly combining the excitement of WB critters blasting away with BFGs with plenty of good old fashioned platforming. The camera goes a little haywire in close quarters and you can only lock-on when armed—it's also easy to lose your character in dark places as the enemies illuminate and you don't—but these are minor and infrequent irritations that do little to hurt the overall tomfoolery.

After lackluster beginnings using Bugs and Marvin (tapping LB switches between a given duo) to lay down simple combos and begin collecting *Acme Illudium* used to power up your melee weapon, the festivities really take off via an ever-growing quiver of *Acme* toys and progressively better level design as you

rub up against the series' most luminous luminaries. Bugs, Daffy, Taz, Foghorn Leghorn, Marvin, Gossamer, and a secret character (well, up until now) all make the scene, traversing locales pulled directly, I say directly, from the WB universe from 200 Bajillion BC to World War I (my personal favorite level). Other than besting enemies via a simple yet effective combo system and exploding various crates and the like (stockpiling coins to purchase arms, skins, and *Illudium*), the gameplay is pure run, gun, and jump arcade fun; along with a brief scoot on Marvin's jet scooter and a wild WWI sidecar ride with Foghorn and Taz, both of which offer welcome diversions from the core action. Where *Acme* really shines, however, is in the art direction. The gameplay is twitch goodness through and through, albeit lacking a bit in the polish department, but the art is five-star. The models all look and animate like the unreal thing, and the set pieces are pure vintage Looney Tunes down to the snarky signage and unmistakable imprint of Chuck Jones. How good the action is often relies on the characters you're playing (we all have our favorites—mine spins) and the level you're on, but the theme stays true 100%

Gossamer blasts his way through the do-do





Taz bangs out a path in 200 Babilion B.C.

of the time. The backgrounds really pop on 360 where Red Tribe has done some spectacular texture work, adding subtle layers of depth to the emblematic WB backdrops. The difference between the final version and the one I played just weeks ago is staggering. They really pulled the visuals together down the stretch.

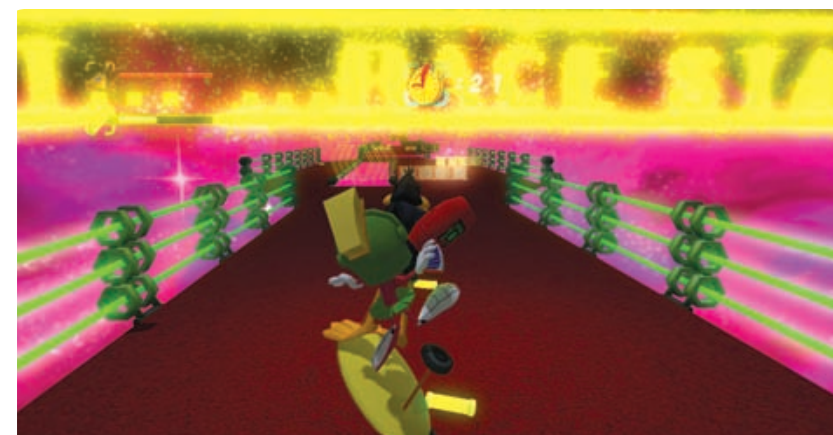
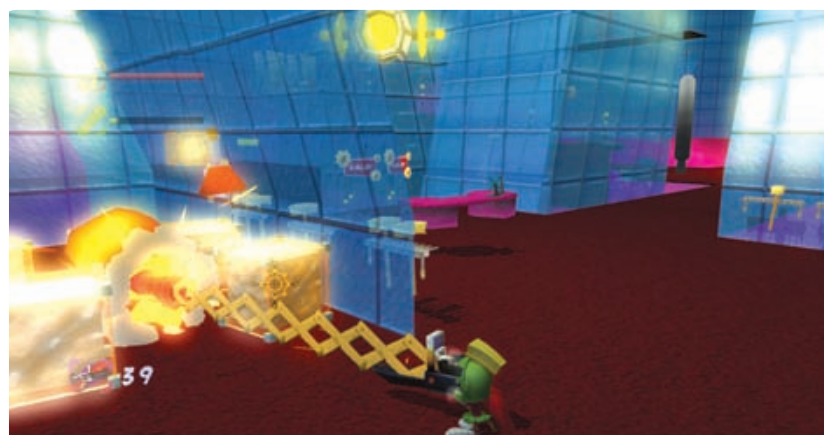
We didn't receive a Wii version for our review but given that the 360 supports co-op play, the only reason to play it on Wii would be if it's the only system you own, in which case Acme represents one of a handful of original games that really utilize the Wii hardware.

The important thing is that the Looney Tunes are back in a game that does the namesake complete justice. It's plenty long for an action game and if replayability is your thing, new skins, new characters and a completely unlocked world keep the party hopping.



"...a thoroughly satisfying outing, cleverly combining the excitement of WB critters blasting away with BFGs with plenty of good old fashioned platforming"

Looney Tunes Acme Arsenal	
score	7.5
+	A fun, thoroughly engaging action platformer based on America's most beloved toons
-	Lacks polish, camera problematic in tight spaces
System(s)	Xbox 360 (reviewed), Wii
Developer	Red Tribe
Publisher	Warner Bros. Int. Ent.
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	September 19
ESRB Rating	E





BioShock

We would be warm, below the storm...

words Brady Fiechter

“BioShock asks uncomfortable questions of its players, and it’s a simply brilliant move.”

“Hurry, Mr. B!” a demented little sister tells her brutish Big Daddy protector, “Angels are waiting for our kisses.” By “kisses,” sister is of course referring to the stab of an Adam collector, and by “angels” she means a corpse. Welcome to BioShock’s Creepytown. Please enjoy both the mayorship and the key to the city...

Hyperbole does not suit BioShock. The first-person shooter is, simply, one of the best games ever made. It drops players into a dark and creepy dystopia under the sea, one populated by freaks and madmen, and offers them nothing but the simple proposition that to get out alive, lots and lots of “the other guy” are going to have to buy a plot. The game’s underwater city, called Rapture, seems a perfect site to play out exactly what

happens when man’s desires are unrestricted; it’s a toxic, inhuman playground where morality can find no foothold. As a result, BioShock is sometimes gross and mean-spirited enough to play a recording of a man compelled to break a dog’s neck, and demands the destruction of pathetic villains who, even as they’re getting plugged, bleat out “I just want someone to talk to!” Possibly worse, players will have the opportunity to murder little children if they feel up to the grisly task. In this, the game never relents. Nor does it apologize. In doing so, it proves remarkably frank—and wonderfully visceral.

Amid the madness, players can choose simple kindness. Little sisters can be rescued from their torment and this, then,

offers up the possibility of redemption. Although BioShock’s mechanic for saving these waifs is far too inelegant (a simple on-screen prompt asks players to either harvest or rescue a child at the appropriate moment), the choice itself strikes a powerful emotional chord. Watching a sister writhe, scream, and die after being harvested is genuinely painful, the sort of experience few games have been able to attain. Yet in gameplay terms, killing these children offers more bang for the buck in terms of Adam, the delicious little substance that allows the protagonist to gain access to superhuman powers. Players then have to either do what’s right or else opt to become a little more like the denizens of Rapture. By forking the road, so to speak, BioShock asks uncomfortable questions of its players, and it’s a simply brilliant move.

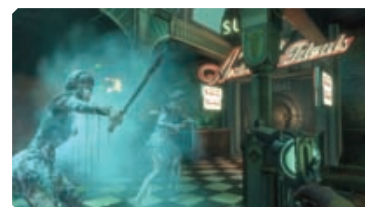
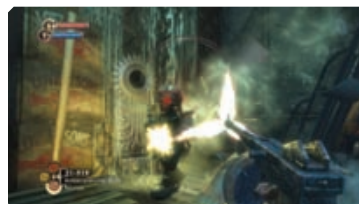
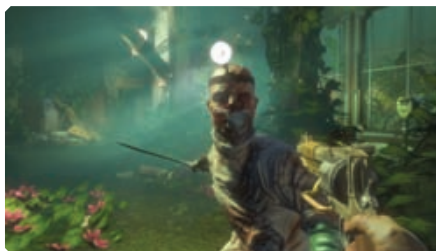
The game dances through its 15-20 hours of gameplay on the strength of solidly beautiful visuals that can accurately capture the dank feel of a slowly deteriorating undersea city while perfectly capturing the twisted sneer on a genetically altered freak’s face. The ability to upgrade weapons, choose superhuman abilities (fire tossing, insect summoning, etc.), and utilize Rapture’s basic technology in lots of different ways, greatly adds to the mix. By the time players get to the lame, “kill me four times and I’ll die” final boss and realize the story (complete with requisite shocker twist) is a bit... implausible, they won’t mind a bit. Because, simply, it’s the journey here, and the ride is absolutely excellent.

BioShock

score 9.5

- + Beautiful, creepy; great moral choices; excellent action; great character customization
- Ridiculous end boss; story is a bit dense and implausible; game is sometimes gross and mean spirited

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Irrational Games
Publisher	2K Games
Online/Multi	No
Available	August
ESRB Rating	M



Guilty Gear

XX Accent Core

Guilty as charged

words Heather Campbell

I've figured it out. The "guilty" in Guilty Gear refers to the blushing humility the publishers must feel when they

release yet another revision to the nearly decade-old series. When highlights of the launch include re-recorded voices, you know that the changes are subtle. Nevertheless, Guilty Gear XX Accent Core (Hyper Versus Duo Extreme Alpha Betamax?) is an extremely deep fighting game made all the better if you've never played Guilty Gear XX before.

Before I continue, I'd like to posit that this series is potentially representative of a great cultural black hole. I think if you showed this game—with its bright, trans-gendered characters and empty heavy metal music—to a caveman, he'd swallow his tongue in confusion. What kind of game screams "Heaven or Hell!" at you before a match? If it wasn't so highly regarded, I'd almost believe it was parody. I think someone should write an essay about the implications of the name Sol Badguy.

Twenty fighters return to the game, including two "reinvented" fighters—A.B.A and Order-Sol. New backgrounds, character animations, and three new fighting systems (Force Break, Throw Escape, and Slash Back) are included in the PS2 release, and there are five gameplay options to choose from, if you count Training. Additionally, there are three fighting modes per character, pulling from both Guilty Gear and Guilty Gear X.

The problem is, no matter how much you tweak Guilty Gear XX, you've still got a pretty stale game at this point. First

"Accent Core is for hardcore friends or brand-newbies."

released in 2002, the series is as fresh as Super Mario Sunshine. I mean, sure, I list Street Fighter III as one of my top games, but I'm not so sheltered as to call it innovative anymore. Accent Core is for the hardcore fans or the brand-newbies. Even the once-impressive visuals have grown stagnant, as 720 and 1080p become standard issue.

Of course, the PS2 release does not feature online play, as the PlayStation network adaptor was adopted by about eight people outside of Final Fantasy XI. That means that truly maddening matches are only available if you've got Guilty Gearhead friends.

Guilty Gear XX Accent Core

score **7.0**

+ Enough new stuff to almost call it a new game.

- I want that 3D Guilty Gear that's coming out...

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Arc System Works
Publisher	Aksys Games
Online/Multi	NA
Available	September 11, 2007
ESRB Rating	Pending



Flatout Ultimate Carnage

Highway Star

words Heather Campbell

flatOut is so set on becoming Burnout that it even bears half of the game's name. Yeah, that's a cheap dig,

but the PR team that titled the game must have known it was coming.

Another racing-destruction game, Ultimate Carnage sets itself apart from Burnout through customization, mini-games, and debris. And weight. You know how the cars in Burnout fly into the air like paper? Flatout's cars are so initially heavy that they lock bumpers when they collide, and drag each other off the mud road and into the grass. Thankfully, though you start out with a real junk-yard vehicle, you can upgrade individual parts on the car until you've engineered a lighter, faster machine that can actually turn a corner.

Nitro bonuses are accrued not only

through crashes (Burnout), but also through the manhandling of street-side debris. Seemingly everything in the world of FlatOut is destructible, and you wouldn't believe how many crates and barrels there are lying around old country roads. Driving your cluttered car along these roads conjures memories of Katamari Damacy – it seems like you're a giant ball of everything.

In addition to your main quest, there's a few sweet minigames, like tossing your driver out of the car with a crash, or using the vehicle like a bowling ball. And multiplayer destruction derbies are madness, with special power-ups turning your car into a wrecking machine.

"Ultimate Carnage sets itself apart from Burnout through customization, mini-games, and debris."

Flatout: Ultimate Carnage

score **8.0**

- +** Fun, manic, and rewarding
- A little starved for originality

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Bugbear Entertainment
Publisher	Empire Interactive
Online/Multi	Yes
Available	October 2
ESRB Rating	Teen



She must be on her cell phone.



Fatal Inertia

Been here, done this...

words Dave Halverson

score 6.5

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360	Multi	Online Multiplayer
Developer	Koei Canada	Available	September 11
Publisher	Koei	ESRB Rating	E

Fatal Inertia is a somewhat perplexing title. Not only is it the last type of game you'd expect from Koei, but it's been a long time coming, leading us to believe that perhaps another PS3 racing epic in league with MotorStorm was on the way. The jump to 360 dashed those hopes, but still, a hover-based racing game from Koei this long in development? It must be truly grand. Well... yes and no. A product of Koei's Canada studio Fatal Inertia is lock stock and barrel a combination of Wipeout and Quantum Redshift. If only it were as good as either. The game is pretty enough—you can't argue with these visuals—and it plays like a dream to be honest, however, the courses are tiny. They grow slightly as you advance through career mode—which does offer various challenges unique to the brand—

but without any characters to latch onto (teams are represented by static symbols ala post-PSOne WipeOut) you never really feel invested in the game. It's a shame things are so shallow given how good the game feels. You'll also notice some peculiar texture and poly popping during fly-bys—a telltale sign that something went awry during development—and a soundtrack and scenario seemingly lifted directly from WipeOut. At \$39.99, Fatal Inertia might be worth a look but at \$59.99 you better eat drink and sleep futuristic racing. Meanwhile, Quantum Redshift, it's selling for around five to ten bucks on eBay in case you missed it.

"The game is pretty enough—you can't argue with these visuals."

Round and round you go...



Two Worlds

Your epic awaits

words Dave Halverson

score 6.5

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC	Multi	up to 8-player co-op
Developer	Reality Pump	Available	Now
Publisher	Southpeak Interactive	ESRB Rating	M

It's easy to see the thinking behind Two Worlds. Elder Scrolls has been a massive hit and it'll be years before another hits home: When opportunity knocks...

Reality Pump has succeeded on many levels too, right down to the wanting character design. Apparently it's written that in order to create one of these games you must bestow your lead character with the grace of an arthritic in a body cast. The facial expression is also appalling, along with the jumping animation, and the overall design is as pedestrian as a cone-shaped wizard cap. But fear not fans of the wandering epic, there are wooded regions galore and enough normal-mapped stone structures and dungeons to feed an army of tinkers. I won't drudge up the voice acting. Let's just say that Two Worlds makes Sudeki sound like Shakespeare. Moving on, the game does succeed as an Oblivion derivative quest. It's bigger—

features 8-player co-op and single player gameplay and boasts a soundtrack from Grammy award winner Harold Faltermeyer. It's not nearly as refined or well produced, but it's the only other game of its kind on console and character design aside it's as pretty as a picture and plays up to par.

"Reality Pump has succeeded on many levels..."



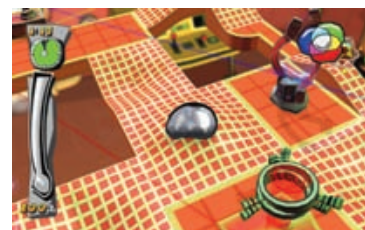
Mercury Meltdown Revolution

score **3.0**

Not how I roll

words Heather Campbell

System(s)	Wii	Multi	NA
Developer	Banbury	Available	September 18, 2007
Publisher	Ignition Entertainment	ESRB Rating	E



mercury Meltdown is just like Wii sibling Kororinpa, but with mercury. What does this mean? You can split your marble into different blobs and affect them independently. On a console that has seen so much similitude between its titles, Mercury Meltdown (it even sounds like Marble Madness) prolongs the gimmicky development that threatens to make every Wii owner apathetic. What is the point of broadening the game-demographic if all you're going to show them is labyrinth in low-res?

It's quite difficult to divorce yourself from the Wii library to see this game clearly. Sure, for the Monkey Ball, marble-loving game set, Mercury Meltdown has

plenty of unique puzzles and mind-splitting features. The color-coded puzzles and relentless time-limit are challenging, and successfully navigating a course with your mercury pool is satisfying in a sudoku way. But the chunky, heavily outlined graphics aren't as elegant as the pleasant Kororinpa, and the puzzles aren't intricate enough to make you feel smart.

I buy games to explore other worlds, and the Wii seems satisfied with merely distracting me from this one.

"Successfully navigating a course ... is satisfying in a sudoku way."



Wasn't there a Saturn launch game like this?

Mario Strikers Charged

score **8.5**

Mar-i-o. Mar-i-o. Mar-i-o.

words Brady Fiechter

System(s)	Wii	Multi	1-2
Developer	Next Level Games	Available	August
Publisher	Nintendo	ESRB Rating	E

i love Mario Strikers Charged, every single bit of it. Or at least I did until I started to see the areas where you can exploit the AI, and get infuriatingly exploited in the still wildly fun online matches.

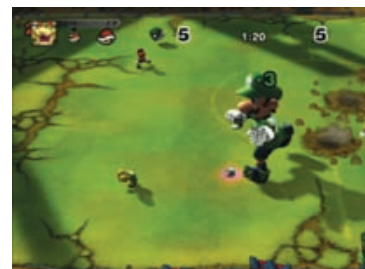
Actually, I still love Mario Strikers Charged despite the questionable character balance and other occasional hiccups, because it is one of those games that in the end is monstrously entertaining. It's the most fun I've had, and continue to have, in multiplayer competition on next-gen.

Games don't often charm anymore, but it's that lucky Nintendo charm that is a part of the appeal here. Characters and arenas and the sound and music and everything in-between are filled with personality and delight. The gameplay gets an added boost, for sure, from the energy of Nintendo's one-of-a-

kind sensibilities. It doesn't hurt either that the Wii controls bring a new and welcome dimension to the interaction.

The more you play the game, the more you see how nuanced and well placed the frantic mechanics are. Of course this is no football simulation, but the constant chaos and powerups and violent defenses don't totally remove the spirit of the game. When things do get a little randomized and what some might consider cheap, well, that's part of the fun, in that same way Mario Kart is a riot when complete nonsense happens at the worst possible time.

One of the game's greatest strengths is that it maintains simplicity of play that recalls the propulsive rhythm of an NBA Jam or NHL Hockey in its earlier days. There's enough strategy to dig into for the added satisfaction, but underneath it all is a foundation of pure fun. That's Nintendo for you.



"It is one of those games that in the end is monstrously entertaining."

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Castlevania

The Dracula X Chronicles

Resurrecting a classic

words Brady Fiechter

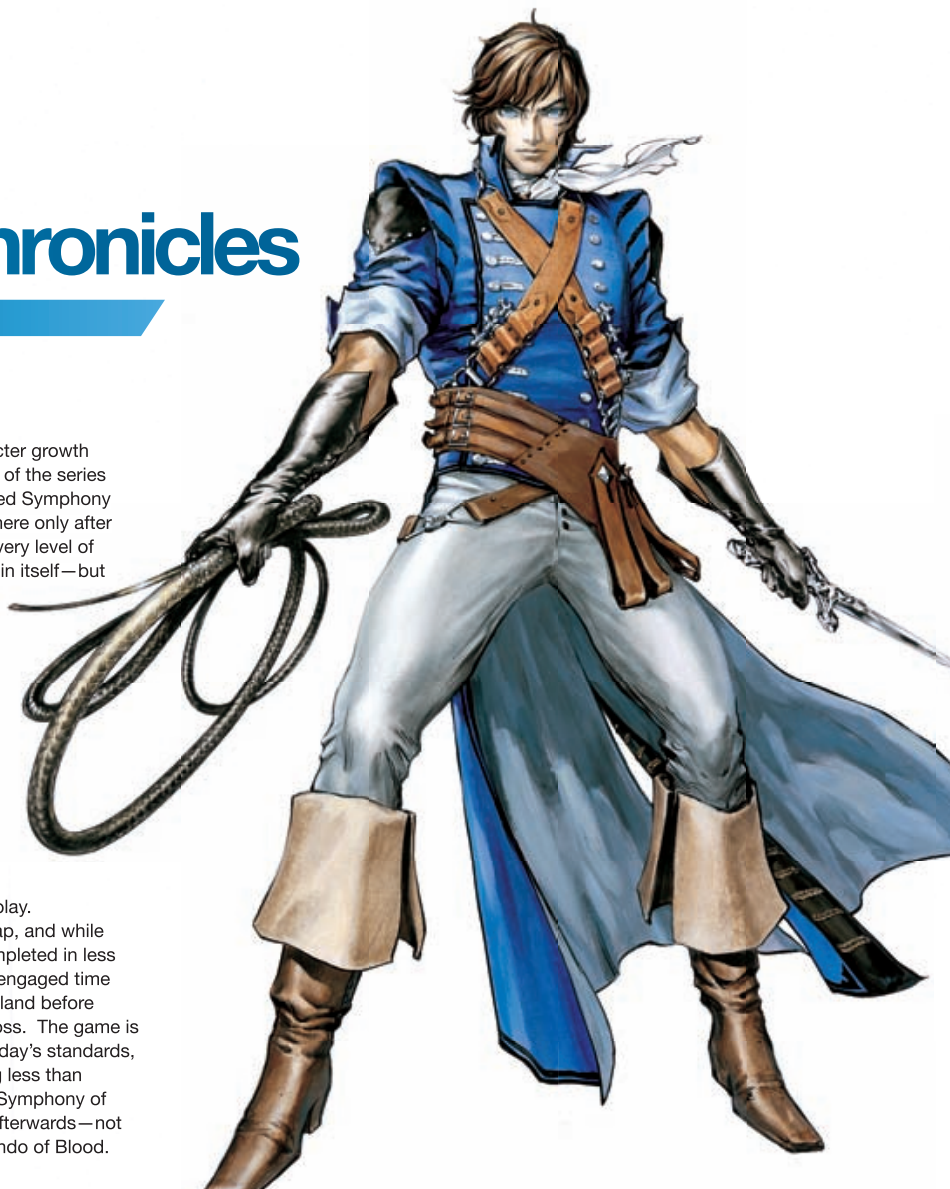
Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles is a visual treat any big fan of the series will appreciate in various ways, but it's not till the final confrontation with Dracula that this fan realized just how superbly the game's artists handled this remake. The game ends where Symphony of the Night begins, re-creating Richter's ascent up the long stone walkway into Dracula's chamber. Essentially the only difference here between old and new is in 3D presentation, and it is also here where even the most jaded purist with nostalgic trappings can see how good—perhaps even better—the setting comes off on the PSP widescreen.

This scene may hold the most memories for me, but wherever your imagination lies strongest, there's more than enough moments in Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles to take you happily back into a storied past while entertaining in a new and engaging way again. It's a refreshing change to play a Castlevania that maintains a more classic structure of linear progression punctuated with an end-level boss confrontation. I prefer

the exploration and character growth that's been the foundation of the series since the masterfully crafted Symphony of the Night—unlockable here only after completely cleaning out every level of Rondo of Blood, a reward in itself—but to be led through these opulent levels in a more challenging, purely pattern-focused manner is a definitive part of this entire package.

The levels are compact and densely populated with all sorts of cleverly placed enemies that offer a number of reactive attacks, which can lead to a lot of dying if you aren't used to this type of gameplay. The difficulty is never cheap, and while a level could easily be completed in less than ten minutes, it takes engaged time to figure out the lay of the land before making a clean run to a boss. The game is certainly a short ride by today's standards, but it doesn't feel anything less than satisfying when you have Symphony of the Night to transition to afterwards—not to mention the original Rondo of Blood.

"It's a refreshing change to play a Castlevania that maintains a more classic structure..."



Given the obscurity of the original PC engine origins and all the extras that play to true fans, Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles is an esoteric gem.

Castlevania
The Dracula X Chronicles **score 8.5**

- +** A faithful, attractive, perfect-for-handheld remake of Rondo of Blood
- The music is a mixed bag

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Konami
Publisher	Konami
Online/Multi	1-2
Available	October
ESRB Rating	T

Maria flips some flame skulls the bird.



"16-player combat via infrastructure mode offers delightful shooting opportunities."



Star Wars Battlefront Renegade Squadron

Squadron Supreme. . .

words Greg Orlando

Who knew Han Solo had his own secret strike force? Well, for the record, he did. When he wasn't being roguish, putting the moves on Princess Leia, being chased by bounty hunters, or doing hard time either in carbonite or with the Ewoks, he was commanding the Renegade Squadron, a team of elite Rebel warriors who would storm into enemy territory, run to various enemy strongpoints, and then stand there for a little while until the site had properly been seized by its new owners.

In *Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron*, you get to play as one of Solo's handpicked warriors in a series of third-person firefights both on land and in outer space. The game, in fact, holds four separate sides from both the original *Star Wars* films and the dookie-laden prequels, each of which is playable in the game's multiplayer options: Galactic Empire, Rebellion, Republic, and Confederacy of Independent Systems (AKA the separatists).

Combat missions have players shooting it out with a host of futuristic weapons such as blasters, lasers and old standbys (rocket launchers, flamethrowers, shoguns). Players can seize strongpoints, take control of land- and space-based vehicles, and blow stuff up real good. The goal here, simply, is the defeat of enemy forces, be it by controlling all the game's territory or, perhaps, blowing up a series of crucial ship systems. As with the other games in the series, *Battlefront* also allows for players to take control of powerful heroes and villains from the *Star Wars* films, storming the battlefield as, say, Admiral Ackbar, Darth Vader, or Boba Fett.

What sets *Renegade Squadron* apart from the other games in the *Battlefront*

series are its customization options. Here, players can modify a character's look by altering the head, body type, and uniform colors, and then further personalize their warrior by changing his weapons, and altering his basic characteristics. Each character is allotted 100 customization points and allowed to purchase stuff such as upgraded health, speed, or base capture rate, as well as special weapons or items such as a personal shield or jetpack. Players can customize their characters again and again throughout a match before each new respawning.

Sixteen-player combat via infrastructure mode offers delightful shooting opportunities, as does the more pared-back eight-player ad hoc play. For those not inclined to hunt down other players for a series of matches, the game offers a single-player adventure in which a series of planets must be captured and a galaxy won. Called campaign mode, this more strategy-laden option holds a decent amount of appeal as well.

And, as a postscript, *Renegade Squadron* has inspired its own limited-edition PSP. A white version of the newly slimmed-down PSP has been silkscreened with Darth Vader's visage on the back of the unit and will be packaged with the game for \$199.

Star Wars Battlefront Renegade Squadron

preview

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Rebellion
Publisher	LucasArts
Online/Multi	1-16 infrastructure; 1-8 ad hoc
Available	October



Using Blaster fire on Obi-Wan can be hazardous to your health.

Disgaea

Afternoon of Darkness

You got the whole Overworld in your hand...

words Dave Halverson

If you're a Disgaea fan, Afternoon of Darkness is a road well traveled, albeit never on a portable, which makes it cause for celebration if you either can't get enough Disgaea or like your strategy RPGs on the go, especially given the new one-on-one multiplayer mode. If you're not a Disgaea fan however, Disgaea portable is even better news because not only is it one of the most well devised strategy RPGs this side of Shining Force, it's also among the most well told and designed ever.

Harkening back to the first PS2 game, Afternoon begins as Etna awakens Laharl from his two-year slumber during which his father, King of the Overworld, has died by asphyxiation (choking on his favorite biscuit). Being that Laharl's a demon—and a cantankerous one at that—the news is met by laughter and soon after greed as Laharl sets out to let the Overworld know that there's a new king in town. While Laharl slumbered numerous demons have come at the throne, including his father's most trusted vassal Etna, the only demon more conniving than Laharl.

After a brief training session in which you're introduced to the Prinies—souls of the dearly departed serving their

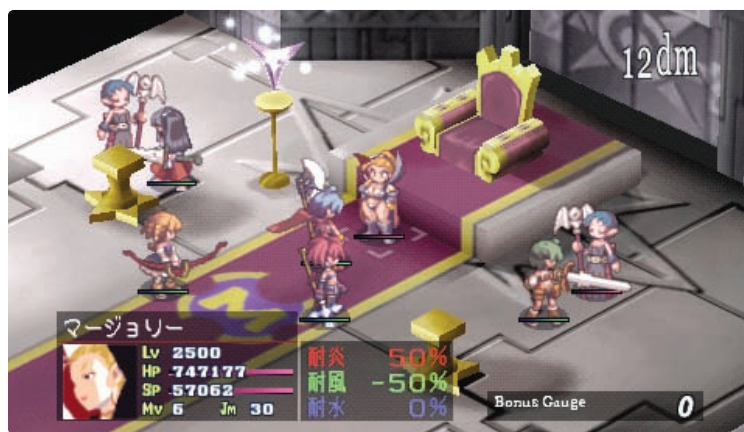
penance as slaves in the bodies of penguin-like creatures—it's off to your typical floating 3D landscapes for a loooong stretch of strategy role playing. Disgaea is traditional in its form but not so much in its function. "Geo Effect" (the art of utilizing colored fields to your advantage) as well as numerous nuances found in card battle games such as team attacks give Disgaea a flavor all its own, complimented by the cheeky demon humor, fantastic voice acting provided by the cast of the 3 volume anime series, and one of the stickiest soundtracks in ages. For portable role playing on the go you can't do much better...okay, Jeanne de Arc, but that's it. Next up: Disgaea 3 on PS3. Let's hope Nippon Ichi gives it the full next-gen treatment.

Disgaea Afternoon of Darkness

score 8.0

- + It's Disgaea on the go!
- You've played it on PS2 and could care less?

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Nippon Ichi
Publisher	NIS America
Online/Multi	NA
Available	October
ESRB Rating	T



"For portable role playing on the go you can't do much better..."

Laharl and Etna goin' at it as usual.

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The Legend of Zelda Phantom Hourglass

Like sands through the hourglass, these are the days of our Link

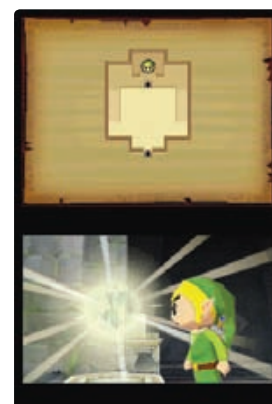
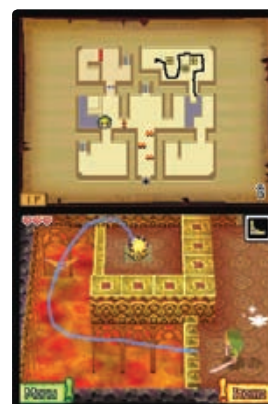
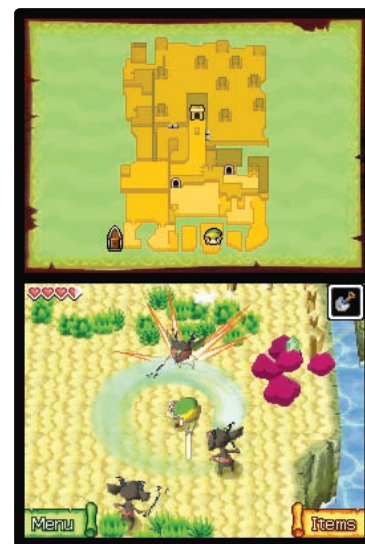
words Casey Loe

few game interfaces have received as much attention as the touch-screen controls in The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass. The new direction has inspired everything from obsequious praise to fanboy dread, but a clear consensus has emerged since the game's Japanese release—they're pretty damn good. There are a few annoyances, such as the difficulty in rolling consistently or knocking back projectiles, but the ability to move and aim within a full 360-degree arc is a more-than-fair trade-off. And despite concerns that Nintendo's intent was to dumb down the series, the touch-screen has actually allowed for the game to be made tougher in certain ways: since you can now label the game's maps, the puzzles have become much more involved, with complex sequences of actions that span multiple dungeon floors. The touch screen controls and cute character designs may have been intended to pull in the casual demographics, but Phantom Hourglass

is tough enough that your grandma won't be doing speed runs anytime soon. Somehow, the hardcore gamer won this round—so go pet your Nintendo, grandma, and keep your liver-spotted hands off of my precious, precious Zelda.

And yet, Phantom Hourglass isn't exactly the triumph I was hoping for. The Phantom Hourglass is surely the lamest title-item in Zelda history—it simply extends the amount of time you can survive in the game's central dungeon. Replaying a strictly timed dungeon multiple times is exactly as fun as it sounds, and even with that pointless repetition, the quest in Phantom Hourglass is short, landing in the 12-15 hour range. It does have some pleasantly non-linear aspects, and reprises a lot of Wind Waker's best ideas, such as hidden islands and sunken treasure hunts, but adds little new to the series. Fortunately, a shot of creativity can be found in the online/wireless/download-play multiplayer mode, in which players alternate between attempting to collect trifold pieces as Link and controlling a trio of

Is the hourglass half full, or half empty?



indestructible monsters that are out to thwart him.

The environments in Phantom Hourglass are a bit bland, but everything looks great in motion—I've never seen a 3D game run this smoothly on the DS before. The music, on the other hand, is overly simple and endlessly repetitive, which is a great disappointment considering the series' musical heritage.

The hype surrounding Phantom Hourglass has been insane, and it's not hard to see why. When you begin your quest, you'll be immediately pulled in by the intuitive touch screen controls and the interesting twists they apply to classic Zelda puzzles and items. But after a few hours of play, the game settles into a pleasant rhythm of simple combat and familiar puzzles that doesn't offer many surprises. Phantom Hourglass is absolutely worth playing and is certainly one of the better games in the DS library, but its quest is one of the less memorable entries in the Zelda canon.

"The hype surrounding Phantom Hourglass has been insane, and it's not hard to see why."

The Legend of Zelda Phantom Hourglass

Score **8.0**

- + Great touch-screen controls, smooth animation
- Single-player quest is short and a bit unimaginative

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Nintendo
Publisher	Nintendo
Online/Multi	2-player competitive
Available	October 1
ESRB Rating	Everyone

HOT PXL

score 6.5

System(s)	PSP	Multi	Local Wireless
Developer	zSlide	Available	September 2007
Publisher	Atari	ESRB Rating	RP

I got my first taste of Atari's HOT PXL back at E3 '06, and ever since that day, I've been eagerly awaiting the game. Even in its early stage, it was clear that, well... I'll just come out and say it: HOT PXL is an unashamed Wario Ware clone. From the style of the mini games, to the set-up for playing them, to the similar-in-feel timer at the bottom, to the infusion of retro Atari franchises (much like Wario Ware did with vintage Nintendo), there was just no denying what HOT PXL's place in life was to be. I didn't care, though: I love Wario Ware, and I was digging the "pixel" style that HOT PXL had going, so the plan sounded good to me.

Now that I've played HOT PXL, maybe I shouldn't have been so accepting of the inevitable final outcome. This cover band looks good on stage, and has many of the same instruments, but they just can't sing with the heart and soul that the original artist did. The Wario Ware series takes simple, basic concepts and crafts around them bite-sized challenges that almost

always have a unique feel. Even after adding the additional 70 downloadable games to the plethora already present in HOT PXL, it's still painfully obvious that you're playing the same limited selection of ideas over and over. Combine that with the surprising under-utilization of content from Atari's gigantic library of classic properties, and the result is a game that can be enjoyable if you've never owned a Wario Ware title before, but sadly forgettable if you have. **Eric L. Patterson**



"...HOT PXL is an unashamed Wario Ware clone."



Jackass

score 6.0

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1-4
Developer	Sidhe Interactive	Available	September
Publisher	Red Mile Entertainment	ESRB Rating	T

It goes without saying, but in case you're wondering: if you're no into Jackass the TV show, you're not going to care too much for the game either. This collection of 35 minigames is hit or miss, and when it misses, at least the inanity of the Jackass crew is distilled well enough to keep the humor alive.

The setup: seven episodes are being shot for the next fictional season of the show, and within each episode are basically five main stunts marked with various objectives to pull off. It takes some decent gameplaying to nail the gold ratings, it's just that the payoff is mostly fleeting. Some of the stunts are too insubstantial: the elephant poo dive has you leaping off a building into a giant pile of poo while routinely matching button sequences. The more amusing moments, like Party Boy dancing to your rhythm-game inputs while a poor salesman watches on in horror, pick the momentum up just enough to make you interested in what might be next.. **Brady Fiechter**



"...the elephant poo dive has you leaping off a building into a giant pile of poo..."



Bleach: The Blade of Fate

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	1-2
Developer	Treasure	Available	Fall 2007
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	T

Sometimes you forget that the DS is essentially a SNES64, and when a rich title arrives on the system, it's shocking.

Bleach: The Blade of Fate has the guts of a prime fighting game, but it's easy to overlook the depth because of the screen it's painted on. Still, here's a full-on-vs. game, with long combos and air juggles, Capcom-style special moves and meters, and a large roster of 28 characters... all on the handheld system that's outselling everything but oil.

Furthermore, if you're like me and you've got no gamer friends, you can play versus games via WiFi. I'm guessing the lag is a little rough, especially since combat is so quick, but fighting anyone is better than fighting no one.

Action is handled by the d-pad and buttons, but special moves are equipped to the touch-screen. With over 50 "power-up cards" to choose from, it's almost like Bleach: The Blade of Fate



features customizable characters.

Toss in the original vocal opening from the anime, and single-cartridge download play, and you've got a very well-rounded DS fighting game (with large sprites to boot). And with development by Treasure, you know that the bouts will be basically balanced. Kudos to Sega. **Heather Campbell**



"Here's a full-on versus game, with long combos and air juggles..."

Sonic Rush Adventure

score 8.5

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Sonic Team	Available	October
Publisher	Sega	ESRB Rating	E

What's in a name? In this case everything. Sonic Rush Adventure is exactly that... combining the action of Sonic Rush with the

ancillary tripe of Sonic Adventure—the franchise's fatal flaw made infamous by the seminal hedgehog's Dreamcast debut. Just when you thought Sonic Team's story-telling couldn't get any worse they manage to sink to a level just above the Teletubbies with their most vapid tale yet. Thankfully the game is an interesting amalgam otherwise, combining the straightforward action of Rush with a Donkey Kong Country-style overworld map and scenario; shame that Sonic Team isn't nearly as adept at fluff as Rare. Further adventure elements come by way of earning material which Tails uses to build the game's various craft, needed to navigate to points around the central island hub. You begin with a Jet Ski on your way to building a dock-load of vessels, all of which are featured in the game's spirited stylus-driven 3D stages. True to form Sonic Team gets the action just right on DS. Sonic gains material by completing various missions, so replayability isn't an



option as earning the right combination always involves replaying past levels and on occasion, bosses. But this is 2D Sonic in all of its glory, so it's a welcome feature aimed at deriving maximum pleasure out of the levels, which are loaded with more nu-



ance and misdirection than ever. SRA also features another feisty soundtrack evocative of a combination of Jet Set Radio and traditional Sonic, and features the 3D boss battles made famous by Rush, only to a new extreme. Why Sonic Team doesn't produce a game like this on Next Generation console... wait: I always say this and I know the answer. It's what Sonic fans want and it would be cheaper and faster to develop. We all know Sega always does the opposite of what the fans want and the company needs when it comes to Japan. Just fast-forward the baby-talk and have yourself a daba-do time. **Dave Halverson**



Hi I'm Sonic; I need a next-gen 2D sequel to stay alive.

Game Music Special Report:

EXTRA

Come with us to hear the new era of game music

words Nick Des Barres & Dai Kohama

Video game music. If you *notice* it, it can mean only one of two things: The music is good, or it's bad. A poor soundtrack can bring a game to its knees, while a great one can elevate mediocre visuals or gameplay to soaring heights. We here at **play** feel the sense of sound is every bit as important as that of sight when it comes to interactive entertainment, and to that end we debut our regular game music column with a report on the absolutely sensational summer event known as EXTRA, held in Tokyo on July 7th.

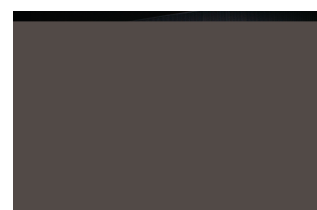
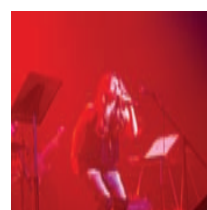
The rare chance to hear game music live is always a powerful experience, doubly so if you're an aficionado owning hundreds of Japan-only soundtrack CDs. Until now these events have been almost entirely orchestral, but EXTRA was a show spanning so many genres—and with so many storied composers on hand—that it almost hurts to think back on. Rock, jazz, techno, classical and everything in between were on display at a powerfully emotional event, one that might be said to mark a major turning point in the history of Japanese game music.

Long-stagnant releases of soundtrack CDs are on the rise again, and internal salaried composers are being outshone by for-hire superstars: Nobuo Uematsu, Hitoshi Sakimoto, Norihiko Hibino and Yuzo Koshiro, to name but a few who performed at EXTRA. You may not be familiar with their names, but you've damn sure heard their works. Among the games that had their music featured at EXTRA: Metal Gear Solid, Silent Hill, Afterburner, Daytona USA, Sa•Ga, Actraiser, Ys, Xevious, Dr. Mario, and Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, among many others.

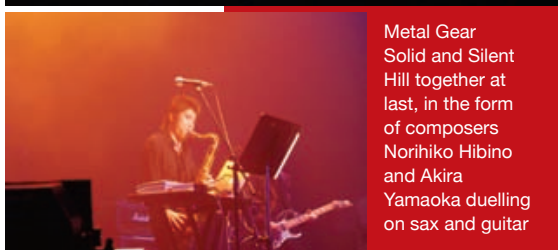
For the grand finale, Nobuo Uematsu's band The Black Mages appeared on stage obscured by identical black cloaks, revealing their faces during triumphantly rocking performances of Final Fantasy battle tunes, culminating in a searing rendition of FFV's "Clash on the Big Bridge"—arguably the most famous tune Uematsu has ever written.

We realize these are you-had-to-be-there moments, and that's why next month we'll be bringing the composers to you. In addition to **play**'s Top 20 soundtrack CDs of all time, we begin regular artist interviews, starting with EXTRA organizer Norihiko Hibino of Metal Gear Solid fame. Video game music in 2007 is transforming. Come along for the ride.

"The rare chance to hear game music live is always a powerful experience..."



EXTRA



Metal Gear Solid and Silent Hill together at last, in the form of composers Norihiko Hibino and Akira Yamaoka duelling on sax and guitar



Yuzo Koshiro, a man who needs no introduction, gazes intently at the score for his tear-jerking piano rendition of "Feena" from the Ys series



The big finish: Nobuo Uematsu and The Black Mages eviscerate the wailing crowd with timeless Final Fantasy battle tunes



No Japanese game-related event is complete without plentiful goods for sale. Fabulous officially-licensed Nintendo shirts competed with rare music CDs for the aficionado's yen



Backstage after the show, **play** makes nice with a triumphantly beaming Uematsu and Koshiro



Any die-hard game fan would instantly recognize Takenobu Mitsuyoshi's piercing cry of "DAY-TOHHH-NAH! Let's go away!"

EXTRA: The Official Compilation

EXTRA did not begin and end on July the 7th; it is ongoing and forevermore thanks to the pressing of its tracks onto compact disc as 'EXTRA Official Compilation'. Get thee to your favorite import CD retailer—amazon.co.jp will do—and search for catalog number VGCD-0087. Groove to exclusive arrangements from the various games featured at the show: It's almost like being there!



Hajime no Ippo Revolution

(Fighting Spirit/Victorious Boxers Revolution)

Japan's favorite fictional featherweight fighter, flaunting fancy footwork, faces a fierce foe and feints, ferociously flogging Wii Sports Boxing, finally forcing fatal fractures.

words Dai Kohama

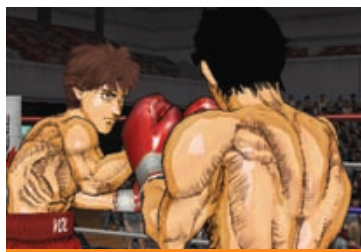


the "Dempsey Roll": A dynamic bobbing-and-weaving technique employed by the enormously influential 1920s heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey. You might know it as an accepted boxing term known the world over, but what you may not be aware of is that the expression was coined seventy years after the fact, in Jyoji "George" Morikawa's manga, Hajime no Ippo.

Imagine that—a Japanese comic contributing a term to the international sport of boxing. I only bring the topic up to give you some perspective on how pervasive and potent Hajime no Ippo is. This is no random anime license of the week; it's been Japan's foremost sports series for the better part of twenty years. Buoyed both by boutique boxing developer Grand Prix's many years of experience with the series on PlayStation 2 and almost two decades of material for rival characters (the game features twenty-five), it's safe to say Hajime no Ippo Revolution is the best video game outing

the series has ever made.

Hajime no Ippo (the series is known as Fighting Spirit in its English translation, and Victorious Boxers in its Western game incarnations) is many things, but one thing it is not is Wii Sports Boxing. While Ippo can be just as strenuous physically—if not more so—there is no simple thrusting of arms. Two radically different Wiimote schemes are offered: Publisher AQ Interactive describes them as "fighting with your fists", and "fighting with your head", respectively. "Fists", officially termed "Swing Mode", emphasizes a control scheme I can only think of as *sensory*, using various manipulations



"Hajime no Ippo is many things, but one thing it is not is Wii Sports Boxing."

of Wiimote and Nunchuk for everything except blocking—jabs, hooks, uppercuts, dodging, even movement—arranged as naturally as might be imagined for a configuration that has you holding two white slabs in your fists. "Head", conversely, called "Pointer Mode" in the game, is less arduous and more technical, assigning movement to the Nunchuk's analog stick and making judicious use of button presses in addition to motion control. You can even play with the Classic Controller if you want, just like the PS2 versions; all together, there are five methods of control.

Perhaps fitting for a Wii game, the best thing about the game is its control, although the visuals are no slouch. I'm beginning to see that for cel shading, or a manga/anime look, the Wii's comparatively low specs are totally adequate: this is the best Morikawa's characters have ever looked in 3-D. For the serious fan, recreating famous series fights is a joy, and the extensive story mode offers plenty... though if you don't know Ippo well, its frequent gaps will likely prove completely baffling, and although there are tons of characters, once you're finished with the one-player there's little left to do.

Hajime no Ippo Revolution is a superb first shot at what a serious boxing game could be like on Wii, utterly blowing Wii Sports' interpretation of the sport out of the water. The good thing about this series of games is that they're likely to continue on Wii just as they did on PS2, and I'm hugely interested in seeing what Grand Prix pulls out of the bag next to refine the laudable pugilism simulation they have built here.



Hajime no Ippo Revolution isn't just about flailing your arms wildly. Multiple control schemes are offered: One positively aerobic, requiring elaborate motions be made, and another using less strenuous motion control together with the Nunchuk's analog stick.

Hajime no Ippo Revolution

Score 8.0

- + Very well-done control schemes; there's something here for everyone
- The game will probably be a bit baffling for non-fans; little extra content

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Grand Prix
Publisher	AQ Interactive
Multi	2
Available	Now Japan, 2007 US



It's A Wonderful World

And I think to myself/What a wonderful game

words Nick Des Barres

Finally, after years of being taunted with fleeting glimpses of Shibuya “street” culture and jangling wannabe Chrome Hearts accessories in his angular Final Fantasy heroes, we are finally treated to Tetsuya Nomura’s fetishistic dream game. The degree to which he lets his freak frag fly in *It’s A Wonderful World* is so staggering I almost don’t even know where to begin—every Nomura quirk you’ve come to know/accept over the past decade of his aesthetic reign at Square is on full and *fierce* display. Just look at protagonist Cloud...I mean Squall, wait, no, Sion... sorry, wrong again...Gackt, no, that’s not quite right...Tidus? Roxas? Sora! That’s gotta be it. Yes, young protagonist Sora, who...huh? This guy’s named Neku? I thought this was a Kingdom Hearts spinoff!

That’s Sora’s Wisdom Form from KHII, surely. Huh? It’s not? Okay, then, the bad guys all in black...that’s Organization XIII, right? No? They’re the “Grim Reapers”? Fair enough. At least I’m positive the cutely-themed enemies are the Heartless. What? They’re called the “Noise”? Just what exactly is going on here?

I’ll tell you what. A quality game is what’s going on here, despite Nomura’s apparent unleashing of years of pent-up angst, explosively spewing out design ideas his bosses likely judged too extreme for Kingdom Hearts or Final Fantasy. You want Nomura? I’ll give you Nomura: Cold, standoffish main character who only wants to be alone in the world? Check. Tomboyish heroine who melts said boy’s icy heart? Double check. Shorts? Sneakers? Cellphones? Excessive use of hair products? Endless nods to a fashion

movement that peaked nearly ten years ago? Septuple check. Don’t get me wrong; I’m a card-carrying member of the Tetsuya Nomura Defense Force, but this is almost too much. The key question that must be asked sooner or later in his career—are his designs still relevant?—can be delayed that much longer, for the key reason that *Wonderful World* is, quite simply, a really good game.

While undeniably true of the designs, *Wonderful World* could also be called a Square Enix pastiche in terms of its gameplay. The Kingdom Hearts comparisons above aren’t frivolous; the game is practically a mirror image of the KH series. Hero Neku, a callous 15-year-old Tokyo youth with *great* fashion sense, wakes up to find himself mysteriously trapped in a lovingly-recreated and





surprisingly-accurate recreation of Shibuya, Tokyo. He soon discovers that a strange badge he finds on himself has given him the ability to read the thoughts of those around him, uncovering personal secrets ranging from the inane to the humiliating. This might be nice if a text message hadn't simultaneously appeared on his cell phone informing him he must reach a certain point in the town within sixty minutes or be erased from reality. On his way he is menaced by the Heartle... er, Noise, odd themed creatures that have seemingly appeared from nowhere and are invisible to everyone around him. He soon meets Shiki, an equally-fashionable girl his age, who seems to know a lot more about what's going on: It seems various pairs of youths in this alternate Shibuya are being challenged to complete a "game" with timed checkpoints over the course of seven days, and should they fail, their very existence will be wiped out.



To reveal anything more about the nature of the "game" or the alter-Shibuya would be to do the very Square storyline a disservice, so I'll tell you about the gameplay, the best thing about Wonderful World. Perhaps not accurately termed an RPG or action-RPG, the game offers a solidly traditional "world map" to traverse in the form of Shibuya with the accompanying semi-random battles it entails (you use Neku's mindreading ability both to gather information and reveal the Noise; they are manifestations of the surrounding crowd's negative thoughts). In contrast to the JRPG-like shell, the battles are in realtime and thoroughly actiony. This, however, is a totally new type of action, a

third-party game *finally* doing something never seen before with the DS's controls. You control Neku on the bottom screen completely with the stylus, dragging, scratching, circling and tapping to invoke his various abilities (equippable badges, something like a hand of cards)... while *simultaneously* controlling another character on the upper screen via Dance Dance Revolution-style directional presses to the D-Pad or face buttons.

That's Wonderful World's big gimmick, and it takes a good long while to get used to. Both characters share one linked pendulum-like life bar, and although the upper character will go into auto mode if you don't do anything for a while, to succeed in the game you will literally have to be monitoring both screens and situations at the same time. It sets a frantic pace I've never before experienced in any RPG—or any other game, for that matter—and makes even the most minor of random battles fun. This is Wonderful World's miniature triumph, and anyone who tells you differently probably hasn't played it long enough.

Unfortunately, the stellar battles only serve to highlight the game's major flaw, and that is pacing. Missions and battles

"The key question that must be asked sooner or later in Tetsuya Nomura's career—are his designs still relevant?—can be delayed that much longer, for the key reason that Wonderful World is simply a really good game."

are invariably prefaced and bookended by ridiculously overwritten dialogue that stretches on interminably: It's not that the story isn't interesting, it's that the battles are so fun. You find yourself offhandedly wishing the game had a more traditional battle system so that you might better appreciate the story, but when the next sequence of battles come around such thoughts are banished. I won't lie to you: It's a frustrating flaw, but I was eventually able to adapt to the odd pacing and overlook it.

Tetsuya Nomura is not a humble man. He almost seems to be *challenging* you to critique, analyze and disassemble his highly distinctive style with this game, even going so far as to make himself an

(admittedly very minor) character within it. Even as ardent a Nomura supporter as I would be the first to chasten him for the sheer audacity of Wonderful World, but he, his apparent protégé Gen Kobayashi, and developer Jupiter of Kingdom Hearts: Chain of Memories fame deliver. This is the best new IP Square Enix has debuted in many a year, and although that might not sound like much in this day and age, consider the climate: Even an unabashed Square Enix composite like this is a risk for the FF/DQ factory in 2007. If nothing else, It's A Wonderful World has given me hope that maybe, just maybe, the halcyon days of the Square and Enix we remember so fondly might have a shot at coming back.

It's A Wonderful World (Subarashiki Kono Sekai)

score **8.0**

- + Perhaps the first third-party DS game to truly grok the stylus, Wonderful World's control scheme is its star
- For better or worse, a very Square Enix game with lengthy and exhausting dialogue scenes

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Jupiter/Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	N/A
Available	Now Japan, TBA US

Wonderful World's recreation of Shibuya's famed "Scramble Intersection" is surprisingly accurate for a cartoony game. Famous fashion building Shibuya 109 becomes "Shibuya 104" and Starbucks becomes "Outback", but any Tokyo fashionista will feel right at home.



It must have been some sort of brain parasite that infected the Japanese video game development community last year, causing dementia, nausea, and an uncontrollable urge to develop high-budget turn-based strategy games for the PSP. How else can you explain the recent SRPG flood that started with Jeanne d'Arc and continues with Final Fantasy Tactics: The Lion's War, Disgaea, and even R-Type Tactics? In the midst of this torrent comes Wild Arms XF (pronounced "Crossfire"), a minor spin-off of a minor franchise that could not possibly have come out at a worse time. I was thoroughly sick of the genre when I slotted XF into my PSP, but

against all odds, it totally blew me away.

XF looks like a generic Tactics game, and features a lot of the usual genre mechanics. But the game plays very differently from Jeanne and Tactics, because practically every one of the game's 60-or-so storyline maps has some sort of gimmick that transforms it into a little logic puzzle. For example, an early mission has your team protecting fleeing villagers who are being targeted by your enemies. If even a single villager dies, you lose, forcing you to give up on fighting foes (except for a character or two you sacrifice as a diversion) and focus on confusing the attackers with illusionary duplicates, casting slow spells to hold them back, and using special attacks to knock the



Wild Arms XF

Shootout at the XF corral.

words Casey Loe





weapons out of their hands. Other maps split one character off from your party and force you to somehow protect him, or give you 99 actions to escape from a cave before it collapses, and so on.

Thankfully, the developers don't expect you to rely on trial and error alone. You're given a detailed briefing on each map before the battle begins, and then an

opportunity to change your characters' classes so they'll have the items and abilities they need to succeed. The classes are wacky fun—instead of the usuals clerics, wizards and fighters you get twenty original classes like Enigmancers, Fantasticks, Wonder Seekers, and Gadgetiers. You'll have to change classes often to get through the tougher stages,

but that's no problem since characters gets all of their class abilities right off the bat, and leveling up a class only earns you the right to transfer those skills to other classes. (However, having to constantly reequip each character's skills and items after each class change gets annoying fast.) You can send your extra troops off to hunt for items or to grind for levels in more traditional battles, but such tactics won't make the game much easier; the bonuses for leveling up are small, making it nearly impossible to brute-force your way through XF. This is a game for puzzle-solvers, not power-levelers, and that's what I love most about it.

But there are plenty of other things to love. For one, Wild Arms XF has a surprisingly good story. (It has no story connection to any numbered Wild Arms game, although you can link it to a PS2 with a copy of Wild Arms 5 to unlock bonuses in both games.) The writers have wisely abandoned the sci-fi-epic pretensions of recent installments, and have instead penned a classic, focused tale about a girl named Clarissa who visits Elysium in search of a stolen sword and ends up embroiled in the chaotic nation's revolutionary politics. There's no animation, but the tale is told digital-comic-style, with well-drawn, sporadically-voiced panels featuring Kazumi Sasaki's beautiful character illustrations.

Wild Arms games always have great soundtracks, and Wild Arms XF has no trouble living up to the series' catchy whistling-and-guitars legacy. There are a few remixes (including a gorgeously orchestrated version of the Wild Arms

theme), but the soundtrack is composed primarily of original tunes by Masato Kouda and the Elements Garden group, who handled most of Wild Arms 5. The original soundtrack is four discs long, surely a record for a portable game, and there's nary a bad song on it.

The battlefield graphics in Wild Arms XF are clean, crisp, and well-animated, and the game loads quickly, except for a few one-second hiccups when you pull up menus or cast a spell. Media.Vision has something of a reputation for letting their ambitions exceed their budgets, but with Wild Arms XF they've finally managed to achieve a quest of epic length (roughly 60 hours to beat!) with polished production values throughout. Wild Arms XF is a stunning achievement for the developer, but thanks to the PSP's inexplicable SRPG glut, not many people noticed.

Hopefully their triumph hasn't been overlooked by Sony and XSEED, and one of the two will bring XF to U.S. shores. It will face the same tough competition here that it did in Japan, but I think its high level of difficulty will win it a much warmer reception in the US. If you've never played a Tactics-style game before, this is probably not the best place to start. But if Jeanne d'Arc left you hungry for a greater challenge, Wild Arms XF will not disappoint.

"I was thoroughly sick of the genre when I slotted XF into my PSP, but against all odds, it totally blew me away."



Yukiko Yokoo's character designs should look familiar to fans of Taiko Drum Master.



Wild Arms XF

Score 9.0

- + Polished graphics, great music, lengthy quest and fantastic level design
- A few interface issues and loading hiccups

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Media.Vision
Publisher	Sony
Online/Multi	None
Available	Now

Hellgate London

See you in the tunnels...

words Mike Griffin

It's a rare opportunity to spend some serious quality time (read: days) playing a major title before it's even close to being reviewable. Well, we've done just that with Flagship Studios' highly-anticipated Hellgate: London. Of course it's all strictly undercover, and we're bound by NDA not to be overly specific about stuff like quests, but after tasting heaps of sweet demon slaying, words must be spoken about the proof of its potential.

The most prevailing impression I'm left with is that Hellgate: London handles its different play styles really nicely. My first major character was a Guardian, a thickly-armored melee specialist with devastating point-blank sword and shield attacks. That's right, the Guardian attacks with his shield instead of merely blocking. You can slam it into a zombie's face, aiming the on-screen reticule with twitch-speed release and accuracy. Later on, as I developed some of the multi-enemy shield attacks, I took great pleasure in gathering up swarms of fire-bombing demons in the sewers and delivering a massive 360-degree spinning shield shockwave. "Clang!" The evil host suddenly freezes in place, a chamber full of enemies simultaneously stunned. Just enough time

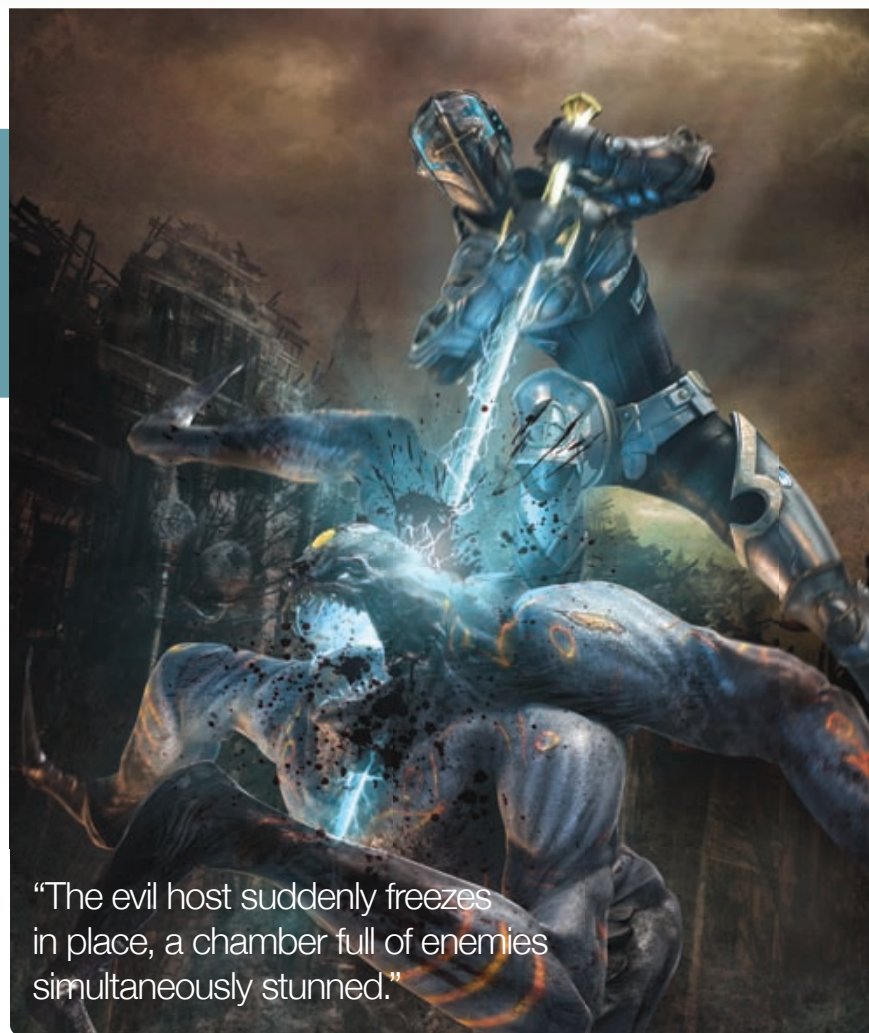
to cleave your way through them with a blindingly fast samurai blade. The Guardian gets to wear some of the heaviest, most imposing armor—great-looking futuristic metalwork bristling with shader highlights.

The Guardian, like his templar brethren the Blademaster, plays in a third-person hack and slash style. To get a taste of the opposite end of the spectrum, the next class I delved into was the Marksman, member of Hellgate's high-tech Hunter faction. This is the FPS player's class, and I'm happy to report that the speed and feel of the first-person gameplay is spot-on. While some MMOs swear by rocket guns that lay down fire and electrical fields, I love the two-handed assault rifles for their dead-ahead stopping power. While on a mission to help fortify a human outpost on the edge of London (the city is awesomely rendered in the



background), I ran into several massive Vortex Goliaths—huge walker demons. Using a combination of turrets, aim-enhancing stances, strategically tossed concussive grenades and some good 'ole fashioned circle-strafting, the Goliaths were toppled one by one. While it's fun to unlock powerful offensive abilities early on, the Marksman also has a killer set of debuffs that will expose creatures' weak points and vulnerabilities.

Thus far, the Hellgate: London experience is extremely promising. Most of the core designers from Diablo 2 are on this team, so those analogies about Hellgate being a "3D Diablo in post-apocalyptic London" are fairly accurate, though characters in Hellgate are infinitely more controllable. There's a truckload of color-coded randomized loot to find and identify, and it pops out of swarms of great-looking monsters, so Hellgate honors that end of the action RPG template. The streets, subway stations, sewers and underworld areas we've seen in the early acts carry plenty of next-gen lustre, and the game's audio is top notch. Next stop: calling forth the power of the Nameless Fire as a Cabalist, and channelling the energy of Hell back against itself. And more loot.



"The evil host suddenly freezes in place, a chamber full of enemies simultaneously stunned."

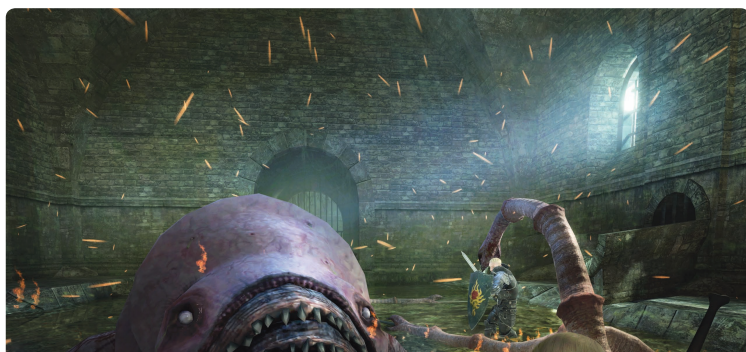


Hell hath no fury like a Templar scorned.

Hellgate: London

preview

System(s)	PC
Developer	Flagship Studios
Publisher	EA / Namco Bandai
Online/Multi	Party play
Available	Q4 2007



THE WITCHER

Witchers are people too

words Mike Griffin

When you tune into the evening news and see what's happening in the real world—the shitstorm in the middle-east, the circus of US politics, Hollywood's finest incarcerations, the polar meltdown, and all the other gloomy headlines, you may feel inclined to tune-out as quickly as possible. Thank the gods, then, that you're in a position to distract yourself for 50 to 60 hours with a game like *The Witcher*. We played about halfway through Atari's deep, mature single-player RPG, and hour after hour *The Witcher* provided engaging escapism.

The Witcher represents a big fantasy property in Eastern Europe—right up there with *Lord of the Rings*. It's a fierce universe not unlike Conan in hue and attitude, yet firmly rooted in a medieval-era of flashing swords, wild magic, twisted alchemy and dark, ancient portents. Don't worry if you haven't touched the novels, as *The Witcher* game has proven itself to be a superb ambassador. You'll learn more about the game's universe in the first hour than some RPGs can offer in a dozen hours, and there's a consistent flow of well-written lore pouring from all manner of in-game sources, whether dusty tomes or the loose lips of a tavern drunk—one of many fully-voiced NPCs running a daily AI life cycle.

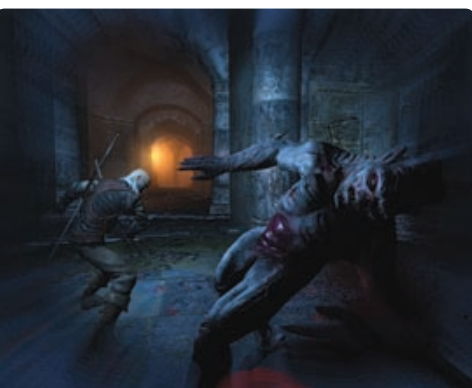
Pulling the strings is a souped-up version of Bioware's Aurora technology. This engine may ultimately capture the imagination more so than the eye, but make no mistake: *The Witcher* is a great-looking game with some very detailed and atmospheric art direction. I'm greatly comforted when developers care about the little touches like boats bobbing up and down in water, trees, foliage

and banners rustling in the wind, birds gliding high overhead, clear and varied environmental sounds and convincing weather effects. The rain is also convincing for the dozens of NPCs in this world, as they'll find the nearest roof or overhang to stand under when the sky cries.

The great part about this engine—and something it shares with the *Neverwinter Nights* games—is that whenever you enter into dialog with an NPC there's a very good chance the game is taking notes, modifying its perception of you, adjusting storylines, and in *The Witcher*'s case, sculpting one of three very different endings for you. While one decision may have immediate repercussions, another choice might simmer in the background, ready to dole-out its consequential wrath five or ten hours later in the adventure. The game includes a very well-implemented journal system that chronicles your every step and it's interesting enough that you'll want to go back and read about your own exploits.

The only somewhat shaky element thus far is the sword combat, which emphasizes three stances—strong, fast and group—and simple sequential timing. I wasn't expecting *Dynasty Warriors* here, but the technique is a little stiff. Thankfully the intent of the combat system is a success, as encounters are carefully designed to be tackled using each stance. You can always mold Geralt into a wicked spell caster to compliment the swordplay.

Atari's fall portfolio may be slimmer than previous years, but with *The Witcher* and the NWN 2 expansion (*Mask of the Betrayer*), the publisher is obviously looking out for its hardcore RPG players. It's already clear that *The Witcher* may be worth the price of admission thanks to its sprawling narrative and great world design, but first we'll see if the second half of this journey can carry the momentum...



Witchers are feared and respected by commoners.



"...a medieval-era of flashing swords, wild magic, twisted alchemy and dark, ancient portents."

The Witcher

preview

System(s)	PC
Developer	CD Projekt Red
Publisher	Atari
Online/Multi	None
Available	October

PC Hardware

Fall 2007 Gaming Mouse Roundup

Like a cyborg pied piper, we've summoned the newest gaming mice in the land for a fall roundup of stand-out performers, from the premium \$100 range to the sub-\$30. Bear in mind that you should take all official resolution and speed specs with a grain of salt, as most users are typically comfortable with their mouse set in the low-1000dpi range. On the other hand, any gamer that enjoys playing competitively should never underestimate the value of more speed and less latency between one's mouse and the action on screen.

Razer Lachesis \$79.99

Available: October
Resolution: 4000dpi / Speed: 60-100 inches/sec

The sleek Lachesis (pronounced 'lak-eses') is Razer's next flagship gaming mouse. Named after the largest pit viper known to man, this "bringer of death" features the next-generation Razer Precision 3G Laser sensor, boasting a true native 4000dpi laser rating and 1000Hz (1ms) polling rate. The next fastest mouse on the market is clocked at 3200dpi as of this writing.

The Lachesis has nine independently programmable buttons and 32KB of onboard memory so you can record a handful of preferences for portability. Typical for a Razer mouse, this viper comes with zero-acoustic Teflon feet and a lightweight seven-foot cord that ends in a gold-plated USB connector.

It's undeniably impressive that Razer has stuffed so much super-fast technology into the Lachesis' ultra-sleek ambidextrous profile. This potent blend of performance and minimalism will be turning (and capping) heads when it arrives in early October.



Microsoft Sidewinder \$79.99

Available: October
Resolution: 2000dpi / Speed: 45 inches/second

Aiming to simultaneously rekindle its Sidewinder brand and raise the bar for gaming mice, the Microsoft Sidewinder mouse lands in early October with a chassis that leaves most of the industry in the dust. Microsoft is calling this the "ultimate gaming mouse system."

The aggressive-looking Sidewinder (the work of celebrated lead designer Gil Manilo at Microsoft Hardware) is intended to exploit an exhaustive list of customizations: ten different buttons, one-touch in-game macro recording, adjustable weight cartridges, three types of mouse feet for different surfaces, and a cable anchor to give the mouse a cordless feeling.

The Sidewinder includes on-the-fly DPI switching and—a first for a gaming mouse—an LCD display to monitor speed and macro settings. To improve response and prevent mis-clicks, the Sidewinder uses vertically positioned metal side buttons and a wide metal scroll wheel. No, it does not shoot fire or cook pasta. However, it should improve scores.



Logitech G9 \$99.99

Available: September
Resolution: 3200dpi / Speed: 45-65 inches/second

Microsoft isn't the only one boasting Batman-like gadgetry. Logitech's newest deluxe gaming mouse, the G9, includes interchangeable grips made of different materials. The soft, rounder texture of the Wide Load grip is designed for overall hand comfort, while the more compact form of the Precision grip is designed to improve fingertip control. Logitech will offer additional type of grips following the G9's release. The G9 also boasts Polytetrafluoroethylene feet (think über Teflon) rated for 250 kilometers of use.

Like the ever-popular G5, the G9, a decidedly right-handed mouse, includes a weight tuning cartridge that lets you add up to 28 grams of positioned weights to the mouse. The G9 also features on-the-fly dpi adjustment (up to 3200dpi) and a scroll wheel toggle for frictionless or click-scrolling. Matching the onboard memory of the Razer Lachesis, the G9 can store five profiles locally, so you can take your settings to any computer. Logitech will back up the G9 with a 3-year warranty.



Wolf King Trooper \$29.99

Available: Now
Resolution: 2200dpi / Speed: 45-65 inches/second

So you're loving the features of the Microsoft, Razer and Logitech offerings, but their prices go beyond what you'd like to spend on a mouse...enter the Wolf King Trooper. The Trooper isn't the best-looking mouse in this round-up, or the most agile, but it nonetheless provides decent features and solid speeds at a low price.

Available in 4 colors (red, black, blue and silver), the Trooper's somewhat bulky shell is still comfy thanks to its long side skirts. It may prove a tad large for small hands, however. The Trooper has a convenient (and driverless) on-the-fly sensitivity button that lets the user cycle through 800, 1600, and 2200dpi settings on a whim. Colorful LED lights keep you abreast of the current speed.

The Trooper also features a somewhat odd built-in capability that you may eventually find a use for: one-click rapid fire. When enabled, you can have the Trooper fire between 2 to 4 shots with a single click.





ask alienware

no. 015 // october 2007

This month's installment tackles home theatre PC inquiries, asks if wi-fi gamer peripherals can really make a difference, re-examines console and PC compatibility, and reads the future of PC hard drive storage.

Q. The only way I'm convincing my wife to let me buy a whole new PC is to put it in the living room where we can connect it to the HDTV. She'll play the occasional web game, look at pictures, I'll play games. Are we going to be able to connect the PC to our digital cable service? Jason, ON.



Alienware: At the moment, Alienware does not sell PCs that eliminate the need for a set-top box. Down the road, however, there will be technologies that will enable you not to have to acquire a set-top box from your cable satellite provider.

Q. Can VGA or component handle a full 1080p signal, or is that strictly the domain of DVI and HDMI? Chris, MS.

Alienware: Yes, you can get 1080p quality for VGA; however, the maximum resolution for your component is 1080i.

Q. Which console has the easiest/most convenient connectivity to a PC – the Xbox 360 or PS3? If I buy a next-gen console, I may want to move some movies around and possibly stream MP3s from PC to console. I'd like to do this wirelessly through a router, as the den and TV room are far apart. Miller, CA.



Alienware: The Xbox 360 provides easier connectivity to a PC than the PS3 since it is based on Microsoft software. This will allow you to stream most of your media. Even better, if you have a media center PC like the Hangar18: HD Entertainment Center or Area-51 m9750 notebook, you will also be able to use the Xbox 360 as a media center extender as well.

Q. Do any of these supposed "gaming wi-fi cards" and "gaming routers" actually provide some real advantage in games versus the typical high-bandwidth models that are available? What sort of circuitry or settings would the gaming models include that "normal" wi-fi cards and routers wouldn't have? Jeremy, TX.



Alienware: Yes, most of these devices are optimized to give you an easy-to-use interface that makes configuring online games simple. However, most of their functions can be replicated on typical high-bandwidth models. Just keep in mind that this requires technical network knowledge. Most of the Wi-Fi gaming routers provide easy access to open your games' correct ports and enable DNS without a problem.

Q. I have friends in the pro graphics sector that tell me about the incredible specs on their work computers, but lately I find home specs are catching up—especially with regards to hard drives. Since we've all become media gluttons now, hard drive size is skyrocketing. Are giant traditional hard drives the way of the future in PC, or are there other massive storage solutions on the horizon? Kelly, WA.

"The Xbox 360 provides easier connectivity to a PC than the PS3 since it is based on Microsoft software."



Alienware: It's true that large traditional hard drives will be part of the future, but there are also new technologies like solid state hard drives and hybrid hard drives that will give you faster access time. Hybrid drives work as a large flash memory; solid hard drives, on the other hand, operate differently than traditional HDs and hybrid drives by not having any moving parts, which allows for more stability and reliability. Please note, though, that while solid state and hybrid drives offer much faster access time, the storage capacities on both are smaller.



Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest new products.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bitrates and firewalls, send them along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free 1-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Mythos surfaces, enters second beta phase

There's another online action RPG from Flagship Studios lurking in the shadows and this one appears to be a cost-effective solution for everyone involved. In development at Flagship Seattle, Mythos is being steered by a new 10-man division that includes previous members of Blizzard and Cavedog, in addition to several core staff from the popular Wild Tangent game Fate, and Cris Velasco handling the tunes. Mythos is a high fantasy world where you can play as a human, satyr or gremlin, using the Bloodletter, Pyromancer and Gadgeteer classes to slaughter foes in classic Diablo-like fashion.

Believe it or not, Mythos uses the same engine and network code as Hellgate: London. As one can see, the graphics are intentionally more stylized and colorful, the geometry's much

simpler, and thus the required system specs for Mythos are much lower.

This falls right in line with the planned free-to-play service that Flagship will offer Mythos players, as the company is taking a stab at the quickly-becoming-ubiquitous micro-transaction model. Flagship hasn't confirmed what kind of items or character enhancements they're planning to offer, but it's a safe bet that it will involve Experience, Health and Mana.



The Saga continues

For many people, the concept of a fantasy RTS game set in a persistent online world sounds like a dream come true, including Silverlode Interactive, the publisher of Saga. Every building you raise and every unit you summon adds to your persistent land, holdings and power in Saga. Players can wage war against each other or join up for multiplayer quests in this land of orcs, goblins, dragons and robots. You can trade troops, spells and resources with other players using Saga's handy marketplace. And when you log out of the game, the

Saga world will continue on without you.

The Saga team recently split from its co-developer and delayed the title, citing a graphics engine overhaul as one of the key factors. As Saga's producer Jason Faller explained to Play, the new engine is: "...meant to widen the spectrum, which of course means working hard on the high-end possibilities but also includes a lot of optimization so that low-end machines

will continue to run Saga." They're also adding a ton of new content, including challenging and rewarding Heroic quests for 4 to 8 players and new spells and abilities to further the complexity of battles.

Saga will be absolutely free to play, and the team hopes to use booster pack sales (units, items, etc.) to keep the game alive for years to come.



Download this!

On September 25th EA and Crytek will release the official Crisis demo. Take a break from your Halo 3 marathon to rumble in Crytek's latest jungle.

A dishload of WoW

Want a free copy of World of Warcraft plus an 11-month subscription? Satellite provider DirecTV has partnered with Blizzard to offer this sign-up bonus to new customers. Little do they know that people who play WoW don't have time to watch TV. Offer ends November 30th.



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play anime

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Volume 1 and Starter Set
Available October 16, 2007

Prebook September 11, 2007



www.funimation.com/glassfleet



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BLACK LAGOON

The second barrage

The ultimate vacation destination! (To get dead)

words Dave Halverson

the year's hottest anime series enters its second season with its best story arch and single episode yet, as the city of Roanapur Thailand falls under siege. But this is no paramilitary operation. Someone or something is out to upset the balance of power in a city that likens itself to a Club Med for organized crime organizations. And we're talking sadistic extermination aimed primarily at Hotel Moscow, and is Balalaika (aka Fry Face) ever pissed. Hell hath no fury like a Russian crime syndicate leader scorned.

Lagoon Company's involvement is somewhat limited as the first episode gets underway—this one is too heavy for even them—as vigilantes pile into the city along with the various syndicates' more expendable forces to root out the culprits and collect the 50K US bounty. But where there's 50K US... you know Revy is close by, and this time she's in cahoots (sort of) with Sister Mary innocent

"Hell hath no fury like a Russian crime syndicate leader scorned."

from last season who's traded in her nun habit for a pair of short shorts and a clingy tank top. God I love this show. As always the script and American voice talent is exceptional, as is the animation and production through and through. As for the murderers... this one is just too good to reveal. Good thing Green Tooth Johnny brought his elephant gun.

Black Lagoon The Second Barrage

score **9.5**

+ Season 2 meets or exceeds the quality of season 1, and in this case that's saying something.

- Still no Blu-Ray or HD version

Released By Geneon Entertainment

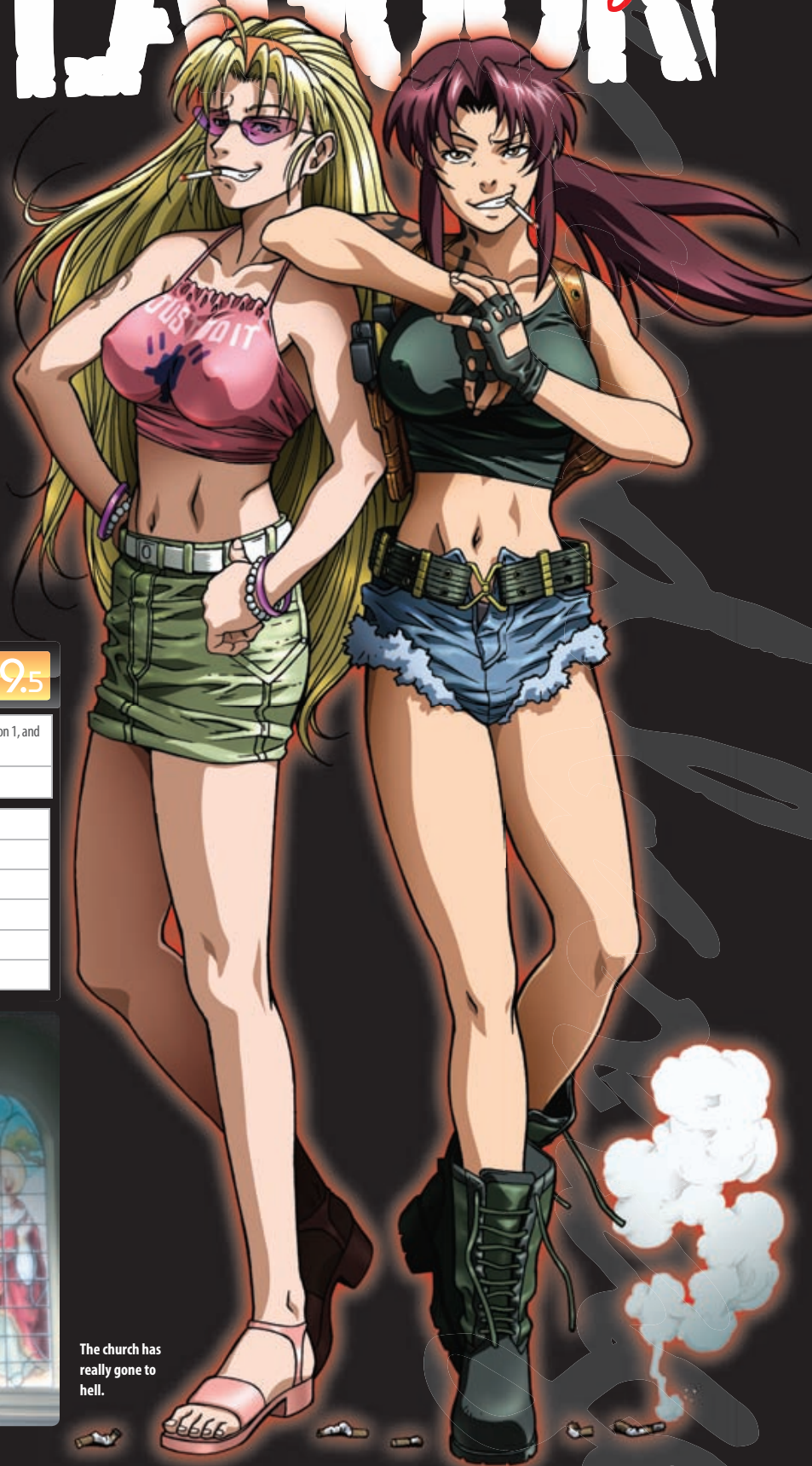
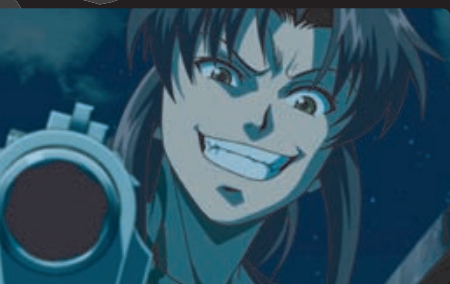
Volume 1

Running Time 100 Minutes

Episodes 4

Rating 16 and up

Available November 20



The church has really gone to hell.

The Slayers

The Complete First Season

Lina to the first power

ah, life before Naga... Anime's most infamous (and flat-chested) bandit killer, über-sorceress Lina Inverse enjoyed a short-lived solo career once upon a time, stealing from evil doers and... keeping it for herself of course: She eats like a horse! Some goons just don't now when to quit however (namely the Dragon Fangs) and confront Lina to get their loot back. Enter Gourry, skilled swordsman and all-around do-gooder to the rescue, mistaking Lina for a "little girl" in distress judging solely by the size of her boobs (he's also painfully stupid). Short story shorter, the two join forces and The Slayers are born. Essentially a mixture of dumb and dumber and every fantasy element from every book, the original *Slayers* series is a slice of old school that's worth every penny, especially given FUNimation's slick digitally remastered 4-disc presentation. The animation is 100% traditional, the script... snarky, spirited and self deprecating, and the character design as distinct and charming as ever. Definitely

among the year's best retro collections, especially with so many spin-offs available should you find yourself hooked. Post the original TV series Lina hooks up with the titanic-chested Naga, her arch-rival-come-partner, for a bundle of beautifully animated OVAs, so there's lots more to love where this came from. **Dave Halverson**

The Slayers	
The Complete First Season	
+	You can never go wrong when Lina Inverse is involved
-	Even digitally remastered The Slayers is no spring chicken
Released By	FUNimation
Volume	NA
Running Time	650 Minutes
Episodes	26
Rating	TV PG
Available	Now



HELL  GIRL

WHO IS SHE?

OWN THE COLLECTORS BOX AND VOLUME ONE
10/23/07

www.hellcorrespondence.com
www.funimation.com/hellgirl

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Red Garden

Every Rose Has Its Thorn

words Bill Gray

more Hitchcock than Hellsing, *Red Garden* represents a bit of a departure from traditional anime. Though macabre, its focus is not on blood

and gore for its own sake, but rather as a means of illuminating the character of the four teenage girls at the center of the mystery. I enjoyed it hugely, thanks to its compelling, if methodical, plot and gorgeous, fluid animation characteristic of Studio GONZO.

Said plot opens on a terrifying scene of blood-spattered violence, dreamlike in its intensity and urgency. Each of the four girls—Kate, Rachel, Rose, and Claire—wakes up the next morning feeling oddly groggy, and with no memory of what they did the night before. All four attend the same prestigious high school, though they belong to radically different high school cliques—Rachel seems like the stereotypical party girl, for example, and Claire the rebellious goth chick.

Linking the four is a mutual friend, Lise, whose body is discovered that day, an apparent suicide. That same day, each of the four sees odd black and red butterflies, invisible to everyone else. The insects guide the girls all to the same place, where a preternaturally

composed blond woman calmly informs them that they must kill a man or be killed themselves. The four react like anyone would in a situation like that—with mingled disbelief and terror, especially after their target becomes more beast than man.

To explain more would be criminal, not to mention impossible. *Red Garden* carefully guards its secrets, doling them out in dribs and drabs over this first volume, and gleefully leaves most questions unanswered. What hooks you is not the action of the fights, but the mystery surrounding them and the quiet likeability of the four protagonists. GONZO has carefully dodged clichés of modern anime—the four do not instantly become an elite fighting force, for example, nor do they even like each other much. Much of the anime's slow (sometimes frustratingly so) pace is due to how much time it spends on seemingly everyday interactions the girls have at school, at home, with their families. But it is in these very interactions—in one case Kate and Rose even share a bowl of soup from Seinfeld's Soup Nazi's kitchen—that attach you to these characters, giving you time and space to appreciate them and the horror of the situation in which they find themselves.

Of course, if you're turned off by the slower pace, there's always GONZO's slick production values to get lost in. The studio has continued to improve its animation, seamlessly integrating CGI with hand-drawn work. Appropriate and well-cast English dubbing and a haunting, classical score tie everything else together, resulting in a beautiful *Garden* indeed.

Gonzo's fresh
picked *Garden*
girls.

"Of course, if you're turned off by the slower pace, there's always GONZO's slick production values to get lost in."

Red Garden

score 9.0

- + So pretty it'll make your eyes bleed.
- Could this garden grow any slower?

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	100 Minutes
Episodes	5
Rating	16 and up
Available	September 2007

Dark Moon Diary

Her own flesh and blood

words Dave Halverson

There's nothing like a well told fish-out-of-water story, especially when it involves a young teenager sent to live with her extended family... who all happen to be vampires. Such is the case for 15 year old Priscilla, who finds herself in the charming European town of Nachtwald in the care of her last "living" relatives after her parent's sudden demise. Nachtwald is not unlike any other quaint European town, save for a population comprised of werewolves, witches, ghosts and other such preternatural beings.

Things might not be so bad if the food didn't bite back (blood sausage type AB+ with goat eyes anyone?), her cousin Kitten didn't hate her mortal guts, and she wasn't the closest thing to a meal at her new high school. Things do begin to look up however, when she befriends the lint-eating Boogey Monster in her bedroom, finds her calling on the high school

baseball team and uncovers the secret to getting human meals tickets. Told 100% tongue in cheek, Dark Moon Diary is Mean Girls meets the Munsters brought to vivid life by Brett Uher and Che Gilson.

Read it if... You like your teen angst with a heaping helping of monster madness.

Dark Moon Diary	
	score 
Publisher	Tokyopop
Volume	1
Story	Che Gilson
Art	Bret Uher
Genre	Fantasy
Rating	13+
Available	Now

She looks happy enough...



School Rumble
スクールランブル

VOLUME 2 INCLUDES:

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- ☒ TRAILERS
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- ☒ ANKWARD SILENT MOMENTS
- ☒ POOL HOCKEY
- ☒ CURRY
- ☒ SURVIVAL FIGHTS AGAINST SPORTING EQUIPMENT

It's a Square world after all

Square Enix is open for business

words Dave Halverson

Square Enix wants all your money. Thing is Square Enix deserves all your money. Besides making arguably the finest RPGs on the planet accompanied by epic original soundtracks and breathtaking movies, they also happen to produce some of the most desirable merchandise too—from brand-endemic jewelry to museum-quality sculptures and top-quality articulated action figures. The only problem up until now was finding it all under one roof at the MSRP. Welcome to www.square-enix-shop.com. Problem solved.



FINAL FANTASY® III

PLAY ARTS® mini

SRP: \$17.99

Release: Available Now

Set of five figures

Online store exclusive

Interview

Hidemi Matsuzuka
General Manager of the
Merchandising Division

Admiring the sheer range of items on display from Square at Comic-Con, from jewelry sculptures, it's clear that you're more serious than ever about branding your series. What lead to this level of commitment for your merchandise?

Hidemi Matsuzuka: In the past, there was a period when we were licensing our merchandise, including figures, to third-party developers. However, just as the development teams at Square Enix pour their heart and soul into the quality games that are loved around the industry, it soon became our priority to pursue the highest quality when creating merchandise as well. It was inevitable that we eventually brought things in-house where we could keep in close communication with the creators to

craft quality merchandise.

Our collection has expanded to include action figures, desk-top-sized weapon replicas, mecha and monster display figures, as well as faithful re-creations of in-game accessories in the form of silver jewelry. Currently we are looking into a line of life-size armor replicas and high-end large-scale display figures. We aim to take on new challenges and continue to grow, so that we can answer to our fans' demands.

In the past it's been difficult to find select pieces from each line and quantities always seemed to be limited. How will the new Square Online Store meet collector's demands?

Now and in the future, existing merchandise shops will always be an important channel of distribution for our products. However, not all fans in the U.S. live near a store that carries what they are looking for, and as a result, we have received many inquiries regarding where to go in order to purchase our merchandise. This is the reason why we decided to launch an official online store for the U.S. At the store's launch on August 20, our server crashed a mere four minutes after the opening, due to a surge in access traffic. We're very sorry for inconveniencing our fans, but appreciate the support, and have high hopes for the future of the store.

Who oversees the design and quality of each piece? Are designers such as Tetsuya Nomura involved in the selection and sculpting process?

All merchandise is created under the direction of the original development team and designers. With the latest technology, we can now utilize a game's 3D model data in the modeling process, enabling us to achieve the most faithful re-creations of characters to-date. However, for the detailed work on facial expressions and costumes we must still rely on adjustments made by hand. It is a time-consuming

FINAL FANTASY TACTICS®: THE WAR OF THE LIONS™ TRADING ARTS®

SRP: \$29.99

Release: Winter 2007

Set of four figures
Online store exclusive

“Currently we are looking into a line of life-size armor replicas and high-end large-scale display figures.”

Hidemi Matsuzuka

process, but we feel that the only way to create merchandise that satisfies our fans is through constant exchanges with the designers that know the characters best.

How do you decide which characters get what treatment? The high-quality sculptures for instance. Is it based on game sales or fan feedback?

We never decide what treatment a character receives simply by looking at the sales record of a game. While it is definitely an element we take into consideration, the demand for merchandising should be in correlation with a fan's desires. We feel that a game's sales numbers are not always the most accurate measure.

Any big plans for Yuna, Rikku and Paine beyond the action figures? How did the all-girl troupe fair with fans?

Unfortunately, we don't have any concrete merchandising plans for these characters at the moment.

Are FF7 characters still the most popular and in demand? How are fans



reacting to the recent FFXII character merchandise?

Although it has been 10 years since the release of FINAL FANTASY VII, its characters are still extremely popular, which takes us by surprise at times. In answer to this immense popularity, we will be releasing new entries in the FINAL FANTASY VII ADVENT CHILDREN PLAY ARTS line (Yuffie, Reno, Kadaj), as well as a line of FINAL FANTASY VII GAME EDITION PLAY ARTS, which features faithful re-creations of Tetsuya Nomura's original character design illustrations (Cloud and his Hardy Daytona Bike, Aerith and Tifa). We plan to continue adding new characters to this line, so please look forward to it. Of the FFXII PLAY ARTS characters that are now on sale, Judge Gabranth is definitely the most popular. We're very proud of how much detail we were able to re-create with the FFXII PLAY ARTS pieces, and all characters including Vaan, Ashe and Balthier have been well received.

Regarding the jewelry, are there pieces for men and women? What's the quality like? Is this fine jewelry or more costume jewelry?

While we do not label our jewelry as specific to a certain gender, our male customers tend to favor the FINAL FANTASY VII Cloud, FINAL FANTASY VIII Squall, and FINAL FANTASY X Tidus designs, and the FINAL FANTASY VII Materia and FINAL FANTASY X-2 Yuna designs are popular among our female customers.

Furthermore, our silver accessories range from re-creations of what characters are wearing in-game, to jewelry inspired by a particular motif within a game. While there is a great variety, we always strive to create pieces that are not simply "costume jewelry," but tasteful accessories that can be worn on a daily basis.

What about price? Now that Square merchandise is available direct will it be more affordable?

Some of the more popular items that went out of stock have reappeared in the collector's market with premium pricing, but at our official online store the pricing will always remain at MSRP. As we import the products from overseas storage according to necessity, the shipping and handling fees are unavoidable, but we will strive to bring our merchandise to as many fans as possible at a reasonable price.

Will items now go on sale simultaneously in Japan and the US? If not will customers have access to the Japanese versions to avoid paying high prices through importers?

Because of differences in the licensing contracts and the safety guidelines in Japan and the U.S., some items currently available in Japan either cannot be released at all in the States or will see a delay in its release. Since our online store only carries products that have



FINAL FANTASY® VII PLAY ARTS®

SRP:

\$24.99 each (Figures)

\$79.99 HARDY DAYTONA BOX SET

Release: December 2007

Height: Approximately 8~12" tall



FINAL FANTASY® VII ADVENT CHILDREN
PLAY ARTS® Vol. 2
SRP: \$24.99
Release: October



passed the ASTM, customers will not be able to purchase directly from the official Japanese online store.

Merchandise that is currently unavailable at the U.S. online store may become available at a later time, after we renegotiate the license terms or after the product has passed the safety tests. We would like to expand our selection at the U.S. store so that it is comparable to the Japanese store, and create a place where fans can shop to their heart's content.

How limited will the top-tier sculptures be? Will customers be able to pre-book in advance?

In addition to the SCULPTURE ARTS currently on sale (FINAL FANTASY VII ADVENT CHILDREN Cloud and Sephiroth), we have plans for FINAL FANTASY VII Aerith and Valkyrie Profile. Because these items are large scale, the stock is limited compared to action figures, but we definitely want to prepare ourselves so that we won't sell out right away, as we know that there are many fans looking forward to it.

There is no pre-booking system in place at the moment, but we will definitely begin to consider our options as we begin to release more large-scale merchandise geared for the U.S. market.

Thank you for your time. Can't wait to go shopping!



SEPHIROTH
SRP: \$399.99
Release: November 2007
Height: Approximately 21" tall



CLOUD STRIFE
SRP: \$399.99
Release: November 2007
Height: Approximately 19" tall

The Music of Assassin's Creed

The spiritual stalker

words Mike Griffin

One of Denmark's finest exports, Jesper Kyd has been creating video game soundtracks since the era of Amiga and Sega Genesis. He's among the most versatile of game composers, often designing his own sound engines and rolling orchestral, choir and electronic elements together for a signature epic sound. Jesper has been busier than ever since the arrival of next-gen consoles, most recently assembling tunes for Kane & Lynch: Dead Men and Unreal Tournament 3. His biggest project, however, is Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed. From title screen to end credits, every octave of music in AC is Jesper's doing. We spoke to the red-maned Dane about his work on Ubisoft's epic action adventure.



Interview

Lead composer Jesper Kyd

Play: You entered Assassin's Creed two years ago, about halfway through the project. What were you able to see in the game that early?

Jesper Kyd: I remember being struck by the free-roaming aspects of the game. I saw how you could go anywhere, and the cool thing about that is you're on foot. The only game I've seen similar to that is maybe GTA, but in Assassin's Creed you can go *literally* anywhere, including climbing all the buildings. If you see a rooftop in the distance, you can go to the top of that building. When you see hills in the background outside the city, you can go there too. It's breathtaking.

In order to match the epic scale of the game I wrote over 100 tracks for the score and we have around three hours of music in there—the game is just so open-ended it needed a massive amount of music. I scored all the music featured in the game: cut-scenes, locations, investigation music, approach music, combat music, escape sequences, horse riding, street musicians, training session music, and many other specially composed music pieces.

Assassin's Creed takes place during a troubled time in history. How did you capture this feel in the score?

This game takes place in one of the most tragic times and places in history, the third crusade, 1191AD. It's terrible what



happened there and yet people were very religious during this time period. So I also found something spiritual, almost uplifting about this challenging time. That's a key element I wanted to include throughout the score. No matter where you are, Acre, Jerusalem or Damascus, there's a spiritual presence. Some of the music is even hypnotic and meditative.

What kind of live sound recording did you do?

I recorded with several world-class specialist musicians and vocalists here in LA as well as a full choir at the Bastyr Chapel in Seattle.

For Acre, I blended a Christian-based music palette including: choral, Gregorian monks, orchestra, piano, harp, violin and other western influences. The color and tone of the music is quite tragic because most of the city is destroyed.

For Damascus, I recorded Moslem male vocals, whispering noises, chanting and prayers; ethnic instruments such as the Ud (a middle-eastern guitar), Ney flute, mizmar (snake charmer / reed-based instrument), Mijwiz, Buzuq (duduk), horns, and other live hand percussion and traditional Egyptian instruments.

For Jerusalem, I mixed melodic

"No matter where you are, Acre, Jerusalem or Damascus, there's a spiritual presence. Some of the music is even hypnotic and meditative."

elements from both Damascus and Acre to represent the clash of two religions. The musical tone is deeply moving, emotional and spiritual featuring full chorale music, solo Gregorian priest chanting and whispering references from the Bible recorded in Latin, with acoustic guitar. Orchestra and strings also make an appearance to represent the strong Western influences of the Holy city. Additionally, there are solo female performances including Arabic singing, Bulgarian and other western style vocals.

What sort of sound engine are we talking about?

On some projects I'm completely involved with creating a sound engine, but that was Ubisoft's role this time. I worked with a sound design guru at Ubisoft called Karl Lamoureux, and he was very hardcore about putting the interactive elements together. We were composing for a totally interactive world, so you can go from intense action combat, to lower intensity fighting, to stealth, to hiding. All these different moods will change seamlessly.

Assassin's Creed is still holding some very secretive cards close to chest, and it's set to be the first game in a trilogy. We're still trying to figure out this futuristic DNA soul connection, if Altair is a time traveler or someone's pet project...


There's a twist to the story that I can't talk about, but it does reflect some of the modern elements we put into the soundtrack. You'll see when you play the game how these modern elements make sense. If you've seen the escape sequences...they have some of the most modern music in the score. This is for a reason.

Kill them all... Baby!



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LAGOON**

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The Show must go on... your desk.

During our latest pilgrimage to Sideshow Collectibles we couldn't help but notice these stunning game and anime-based sculpts among the throngs of movie, comic book, fantasy, sci-fi, and TV-based items, all of which remind us why we can't seem to stay away. If only we could back up a truck... Find these and other objects of desire at www.sideshowcollectibles.com

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< Ryuk CraftLabel Statue

15 inches of Death God with real pants no less.
Act fast or it'll haunt you forever.
\$89.99 Available Now

And coming soon...>

Sideshow Exclusive Blood Elf Rogue VS Draenei Paladin Diorama

To get your hands on Sideshow's amazing diorama based on artwork released as a teaser to the Burning Crusade expansion pack we suggest pre-booking like, now.
\$299.99 Available Q2 2008 (unpainted prototype shown)



WowWee Roboquad

Of all the WowWee robotics I've tested, and I've played 'em all, Roboquad is their best creation yet. Featuring the most extensive real "Brain" of any WowWee robot to date, this is one seriously cool anthropod.

Using rotating legs, an agile head, and an articulated neck to get its point across, Roboquad's spider-like movement is accented by its curious personality accompanied by flashing lights and funky alien sounds. Left on its own it reacts to objects with eerie precision as it scans its environment for an alternate route should it sense an obstruction, be it human or otherwise. Controlling RQ manually is just as fascinating. Using the 8-way directional pad you can move his legs together, in pairs, or individually and cycle through a remarkable range of emotions with easily assignable aggression levels that affect the way he reacts to your presence and objects. He can also see in the dark, turning on his head-mounted LEDs when faced with darkness. All totaled there are 72 functions on the remote. There's even a guard mode. Hard to believe it retails for under a hundred bucks. WowWee indeed. www.wowwee.com



WowWee Robopanda

Although it was developed primarily for kids, I've developed a strange attachment to the WowWee Robopanda, the company's first remote control-free autonomous robo-pal. Maybe it's because the little guy tells a mean story via his onboard cartridge port, or maybe it's the way he crawls around on the office floor, or maybe I was just deprived as a child. Whatever the case, this is one amazing piece of technology for \$149.99. Robopanda has seven areas of "living skin" that react to your touch; dual-axis accelerometer tilt sensors—the little guy kinda freaks when you pick him up—and hearing that detects sounds when you're playing with him. Now if I could only get WowWee to make me a Robobulldog. People are starting to look at me funny. www.wowwee.com

Media

DVD Film Music TV Comics Event

Death Proof

Directed by: Quentin Tarantino

Starring: Kurt Russell, Rosario Dawson, Sydney Poitier, Vanessa Ferlito, Jordan Ladd, Rose McGowan, Zoë Bell, Tracie Thoms, Mary Elizabeth Winstead

Released By: Dimension Extreme

Rated: Not Rated



And by the powers of Grayskull do not under any circumstances miss:

South Park The Complete Tenth Season

Paramount/Comedy Central

Featuring a 14-day World of Warcraft game trial along with the infamous Make Love, Not Warcraft episode, Hell on Earth 2006, Go God Go and many, many more seminal moments, this may be the best season ever. Hear that? Ever!



Metalocalypse Season 1

Warner Bros. Home Video

What could be better than a two-disc set following the on- and off-stage adventures of Dethklok, the world-famous Norwegian heavy metal band?



here's a moment in Death Proof where Jungle Julia (Sydney Poitier) steps outside to text her boyfriend as T-Rex's "Jeepster" plays on the jukebox. As she begins to send her message the music slowly melts away segueing to a tender piano ballad which accompanies the scene until she rejoins her friends and receives his reply, upon which "Jeepster" comes barreling back in perfectly on cue. Only Quentin Tarantino can turn a text message into a hypnotic scene in a movie.

In all honesty I prefer Planet Terror over Death Proof (by a hair), although I consider both films high art. The chattier of the two—QT makes the dialogue his bitch even more so than usual—Death Proof spends the bulk of its time developing "The Girls" so that the audience is good and invested by the time Stuntman Mike turns them into human hamburger. The second clique to make Mike's most wanted list are the instruments of our revenge culminating in, for my money, the best vehicular mayhem since Ronin. It's a brilliant film meant to be savored like all of his works that benefits greatly from the separation of the two movies, including the previously "missing reel" of Butterfly's lap dance. Disc 2 is worth the 20 bucks all by its lonesome. **Dave Halverson**



DOA Dead or Alive

Movie: **B** Extras: **C+**

Directed by: Corey Yuen

Starring: Jaime Pressly, Devon Aoki, Holly Valance, Natassia Malthe, Eric Roberts, Sarah Carter

Released By: Dimension Extreme

Rated: PG 13

Dead or Alive is tripe blatantly T&A-infused video game-beat-em-up movie fare, filled with hackneyed dialogue and over-the-top performances. In other words it perfectly depicts the game it's based on. When people say that it's one of the best video-game adaptations yet it isn't far from the truth, because traditionally producers and directors attempt to make video-game movies based on fighting games into actual drama. The sole reason any gamer would watch DOA is the same reason anyone plays it: to look at the jiggly girls and ripped boys. There are two types of video-game movies: films like Final Fantasy The Spirits Within, Final



Fantasy Advent Children, Silent Hill and Tomb Raider, based on games with actual stories, and movies like Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter and DoA based on men and women beating the shit out of each other. As the latter, DoA is worth two trips to the popcorn stand. **Dave Halverson**

BloodRayne 2

Movie: **F** Extras: **F--**

Directed by: Uwe Boll

Starring (using the term loosely): Natassia Malthe, Zack Ward, Michael Pare, Chris Coppola

Released By: Vivendi Visual Entertainment

Rated: Not Rated

believe it or not Uwe Boll finally made a... Ha! Had you going there didn't I!? On the contrary, the truth is that he's somehow managed to make a film so bad on every level that it almost makes his back crapalog seem palatable... almost. You can't say he isn't consistent. As if the BloodRayne franchise needed any more nails hammered into its coffin how about a BloodRayne western shot with a handful of no-name actors—for good reason—on a tiny little parcel of land that makes the outhouse at Frontier Land look like Dodge city? Talk about a thin story. A lone vampire (Billy the Kid no less, dressed like any five year old cowboy on Halloween eve) bites everyone in town, all 10 of 'em, and takes there kids hostage to feed on while he waits for the railroad to come through so he can build an army of cowboy vampires. For what end we do not know. Funny thing is that the infected still act (badly) like cowboys. Enter BloodRayne (I like Natassia Malthe too; pity she picked up the phone), a seemingly powerless and altogether clueless Damphir (armed with

the sheet metal blades I made in 9th grade metal shop) that has to recruit three misfit hayseeds in order to take down the biggest dickweed to ever dawn a pair of plastic fangs, along with his posse of numbnuts. Insult to injury: Said dickweed (Zack Ward) states that "he blows away Sir Ben Kingsley in BloodRayne" while Boll has the audacity to cite John Wayne and Sergio Leoni as his inspiration. The icing on the cake though, and I beg you to rent it for this sole purpose, are the deleted "scenes." Trust me. If this doesn't stop this maniac from making more movies nothing will. **Dave Halverson**



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BACK OF THE BOOK

Blah, blah, blah



10_07 HEATHER CAMPBELL
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The Great Convergence

A lot of the talk in technology for the last few years has been about Convergence. As the worlds of Internet, Communication, Television, Film, Music, and Games all formally blend, development companies are looking to control the portal that delivers content to your living room.

Take, for example, the recent announcement from Sony that the PS3 is going to have DVR capabilities next year. PlayTV, as the system is called, will not only record film and television to your PS3, but that material will be available for remote viewing on your game-and-music-playing PSP. Obviously, this is in direct competition with Apple, whose iTunes/iPod model does much the same thing. Microsoft's developing answer is the Live system, with Zune, Windows, and the 360 coming together to do... well, we're not sure what.

But the success of the Wii and DS prove that there is something divergent happening in gaming, separate from this Great Convergence. Gaming is splitting into two markets, with hard-core gamers on one end and casual gamers on the other. Hard Core gamers want to play Halo 3. Casual gamers are still hooked on WiiSports and Brain Training.

These two types of gamers are pretty much mutually exclusive. And the philosophy behind their purchases comes down to whether they are into game-worlds or game-play. We'll call them Escapists and Diversionists. Escapists are your Gears of War, Final Fantasy, and BioShock players. They seek to be enveloped in a universe that is different from our own. They've got a 360, they've got a DS and a PSP. And they engage the games that Play has traditionally covered.

The second category, Diversionists, want to be distracted from this world without sticking their toes into the unfamiliar waters of another. Diversionists are your casual players who game for the temporary puzzle-solving rush, or toss in WiiSports just to blow off some steam. Beset by stress, and without enough time to dedicate to long game activities, these are your Wii and DS owners, your cell phone gamers.

Now, just as there is no real market for hard-core, Escapist gaming on a cell phone, the demand for games from this content-providing portal is going to be Diversionist. Think of it this way: people who use an iPod to listen to music aren't necessarily looking for a deep game to be available on the platform. They might download an episode of television, maybe they'd play Pac-Man on the thing, but they're not going to go through a round of BioShock (even if it played at full-speed and hi-res) on an iPod. If Apple wants to sell games to the iPod set, they're going to be casual things, just like Live Arcade games might work well on a Zune.

Now, as a sort of side-note, I don't believe there is a huge market for portable television. It's not that people don't want to watch television out of the house, it's just that there's no way to do it unless you take passive transportation. iPods succeed because they don't require your hands or eyes when traveling.

The PSP on the other hand, with all its media-playing features, is a very specialized machine, for a very small market: people who have long trips where they're not driving, and enjoy Escapist games. People on planes, trains, or in the back seat of a car. (I'll point out here that none of these places features standard internet access, so the location-free PSP player is essentially useless everywhere.) If Sony is to succeed with their convergent model, they're going to need to embrace the casual games market, to lure in Diversionists... which is something that will drive off the very few people who've already invested in a PS3.

The short end of it all is that Convergence is great news for the new Diversionist gamers, and maybe not the best thing for all us hard-core, Escapist types. When convergence happens, and Sony or Apple or Microsoft is primarily responsible for every entertainment particle we consume, they'll take a look at their installed user base and determine that there are a lot more casual gamers than serious ones. More people have played Minesweeper than Final Fantasy... so development will skew towards these mini-games. After all, companies want to make money, and Diversionists are big business. Just look

"As arcade culture invaded the home, games evolved; we all sat down in front of our televisions with save points and battery back-ups."

at the Wii.

Then again, maybe Escapist games were a short-lived, tangential piece of gaming history anyway. Early video games were all simple, casual fluff. As arcade culture invaded the home, games evolved; we all sat down in front of our televisions with save points and battery back-ups. But like the eight hour theatrical opera (who-does-that-any-more) that evolved from basic storytelling, maybe Escapist games are fleeting things destined to be re-replaced by the short, fast, and catchy. Is it possible that many years after The Convergence, we'll all look back at 70 hour games with the mix of artistic awe and personal distaste that is reserved for lengthy theatre? Will elegant Escapist games be the province of a small group of cultural pariahs? Additionally, will a more productive, time-regulated future have room for anything but casual gaming? As Sony and Microsoft strive to emulate the success of the Wii, we're certainly going to see more casual gaming across all platforms. Combine that with the wider audience of post-convergence media, and the Escapist outlook is pretty grim.

I guess there's always literature. No matter what we do to pump more media into our lives, books remain. Despite the alarming statistic that one-in-four Americans didn't read a single book last year, it's notable that three-in-four did. The majority of us still have time to dedicate to something elaborate and profound. For Escapist games to maintain, they're simply going to have to seek higher intellectual elevation. If the content is rewarding, people will make time for it, convergence or no.

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

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